



productive anywhere interview transcript

Chris Guillebeau

Interview with Chris Guillebeau

Fabian Kruse: Hello everybody and welcome to this [Productive Anywhere](#) interview with Chris Guillebeau! Chris is an uber-avid traveler and has visited almost 170 countries so far, all while writing a wonderful blog and building a small business.

So, first of all: Hi Chris and thanks so much for being here!

Chris Guillebeau: Thanks for having me, it's an honor!

So, to get started, could you please introduce yourself quickly and tell us a bit about how you got started traveling. Also, what is the main type of work that you are doing?

Sure! I'm 32 years old now and I've been traveling for about ten years. For maybe four of those years I was living overseas in West Africa and... I've always been self-employed. I was not a very good employee. I didn't like working for someone else and I didn't do a very good job at it.

So I always learned how to work for myself and how to support myself through various self-employment things. And three or four years ago I wanted to be a writer. I felt like I had been fortunate to have had a lot of different experiences, with living overseas and working for myself.

And then I started traveling more and so I started the blog “The Art of Non-Conformity” in 2008 and just started writing about my travels and my quest to visit every country in the world.

And so now the main type of work that I’m doing is exactly that, traveling and writing and building a business.

Perfect. That sounds really great!

From what I can see on your blog, your travel style now is comparatively fast. You spent the time in Africa, which were several years, but now that you are on this quest to visit every country in the world you are switching countries pretty fast. When you’re on the road you might only stay for a day or two in some countries and you also spend of course a lot of time on flights and airports and so on...

Yes!

So, do you feel that getting your work and especially your writing done on the road is harder for you than doing it back at your base in Portland? Or do you manage to find complete focus wherever you are?

It can be a little bit of a challenge. And the first thing I would say about the travel is that I have been doing it for a very long time. So there are some places where I have spent much longer than a couple of days - but now as I'm coming to the end and have about 20 more countries to go to, that's why it can be a little bit fast sometimes.

What I find is that **it's very easy for me to maintain my work and do the things that I need to do in terms of responding, in terms of updating and maybe creating a little bit. But it is a little bit of a challenge to create a lot of new work - especially writing - when I am traveling.**

So I can do some blog posts, I can do some small things, like a newspaper column I'm writing. But when I'm actually trying to write a book, to write a

manifesto or a longer project, then it's much easier for me to be in my home base... or maybe traveling, but not traveling so much.

So that's why I go back and forth. I travel very actively for about two weeks, and then I'm usually home for about two weeks.

So you pretty much [always] have these two-week intervals? That's what's working best for you?

Yes, roughly speaking. Sometimes I'm home for a bit longer.

Like earlier this year I was writing my second book and also getting ready to host the *World Domination Summit* in Portland. And so both of these projects were pretty big and so during that time I was actually home for about two months [...] - and then right after I finished writing the book and right after the summit I started traveling more actively. So I kind of go back and forth.

Cool. And when you're actually in the travel part [...] you will anyway continue to work, as we all see: Because your blog is getting updates and you respond to email very quickly and you get lots of stuff done, anyway. So how do you manage - when

you're really on the road - to balance the fun in the moment of experiencing the place and working on things that might be unpleasant at the time but also necessary to advance your greater cause or what you call your "legacy"?

I guess I would say that I don't think of it as something unpleasant. I think of it as something that's fun and meaningful. You mentioned responding to emails... well, I actually like to hear from people. And if it's my readers that are writing in or something I enjoy communicating with them. And so in some ways **I feel like it's a sense of responsibility. Like, this is my work and the work allows me to travel so I have to keep doing it. But it's also not a bad thing.**

So I guess I just try to break it down into some blocks of time and if I'm on a layover somewhere - like I was just in Frankfurt recently... so I know that city fairly well. So maybe in the morning I spend my time working and doing my emails and doing all of that. And then in the afternoon I will just go out and walk and explore, maybe take a run by the river in the evening, and then go to dinner. So I do a little bit of both. I do explore and travel, but I also don't mind the work that I do because that's what allows me to travel.

So it's all integrated, I don't think of it as completely separate or something.

Sure. This is like going beyond this old concept of work-life balance and really including the work as an integral part of your life, right?

Yeah, exactly! And I think that's very important. Because I'm not trying to do less work! I'm not trying to put off my work or find a way where all I do is travel. **I think that if I didn't travel I would miss the travel, but if I didn't work I would also miss the work.**

Absolutely. Nobody wants just to be sitting at home or maybe travel around the world all the time, but not really have anything he's contributing to, right?

Yes, I think so.

In another interview you said that you like routines and also the advantages of having fixed hours for your creative work - which is probably something you can establish back at home - but that they are also very hard to maintain on the road.

Consequently, you said that you prefer to work by deliverables and that you try to maintain a “discipline to continually create and continually work,” “a bias towards action.”

I really love this approach and think that mastering it is crucial for any productive traveler. So I'd like to chat a bit about this.

You already said that you weren't a happy employee and consequently you preferred always to work for your own. So this sounds a bit like working by deliverables was something that came naturally to you. Did you always do it this way or was it something you really established when you started to travel?

I think I was always drawn to it! Like I always felt like that's what I was supposed to do. But I think it's somewhat unusual. In our culture - at least in Western culture - when you do work at a job then you're probably used to work based on time or based on a routine. And you go in at a certain time and you have to be there for this number of hours.

So it can be hard to shift your mindset. But I think it's much better and I think it's much easier to base your work on deliverables. And so, for me, as a writer,

some of the deliverables are: Okay, if I have to have this number of blog posts complete, if I have to have this column done, if I'm writing a book then the book is 70.000 words; so I need to break it down... hopefully I can get a thousand words a day. Then of course there's an editing process and all of that.

But by focusing on the deliverables it helps me to feel that I'm still making progress towards something. You know, you can spend hours a day on the computer not really doing anything - or you can spend like 15 minutes and get a lot done. So that's why I choose to focus on the deliverables.

So once you reach your goal for the day, do you stop and do something else? Or do you sometimes just continue to work?

I think at that point it depends on how I'm feeling. If I'm feeling good and I'm enjoying it then I will definitely keep going. If not and if I have finished the quota of whatever it is I decided to do, then I will go ahead and stop.

And I kind of connect my happiness and my well-being to these things - hopefully not in an unhealthy way - but in the same way that you would

exercise or something. If you're trying to exercise then if you miss a day or something it's probably okay. But if you miss a whole week or you miss two weeks you start feeling bad. And so I think of it the same way with the discipline of writing or the discipline of creating, whatever your deliverables are.

If I'm completing those things then I'm feeling good about myself. If I'm not, then I feel I have to make some changes in my environment to make that happen.

Sure. So this is also almost like a routine that's part of your life: Even though you might not have a fixed hour to do it, but you definitely got into the routine to write every single day, right?

Yes, absolutely.

Cool. And about the other deliverables... - I suspect that you have this goal to write 500 or 1000 words a day and you probably do that everyday. But about the other things that you do, do you decide about them just in the morning or the evening before or do you have a longer plan that you follow?

A little bit more of a longer plan. I have both: A regular paper notebook in that I write down everything I need to do in different projects. And then I also do use some software on my computer and my iPad to track those things.

So I try to review those things everyday, just on an ongoing basis, whenever I think of something I either write it down or put it on my computer. And then when I start working on things I look at my list and I try to work off the list.

Maybe this would be interesting... it's a bit nerdy, but [taking] this topic of technology that you just mentioned... I believe that you are pretty much a minimalist when it comes to gear and gadgets. But still you already mentioned that you use some kind of software. Could you explain us a bit your workflow, to get a bit into your brain on how you organize all that stuff?

Yeah, definitely. **I do think the most important concept for everyone is to avoid keeping things in your head, and to make sure they are written down somewhere.** So whether that is just on your paper or whether it is the software or Evernote or Google Docs or something, I definitely think

[that] if you're trying to manage a lot of different projects you have to record that somewhere.

So lately I have been using OmniFocus. I'm not sure if you are familiar with that?

Yeah, I have heard about it. It's a pretty close Getting Things Done implementation, right?

It is, exactly. Yeah, it's like a task management thing. So I have been doing that. I used to use a different one, so sometimes I change the program. I don't think the program itself is the most important thing.

I think the more important part is the organizational concept of taking this big project, whether you're trying to write a book or travel around the world or whatever, and breaking it down into all the specific steps and then working on each of the steps as they come along. So that's what I try to do.

So you pretty much follow the basic GTD methodology?

Definitely, yeah. I probably don't follow all of it, but I read that book like most people have, maybe five or ten years ago, and it has definitely made a big difference in terms of how I think about my projects and my tasks.

And then the next step is to really adapt it to your personal way of doing things.

Exactly.

One other thing that's probably also related to your deliverables and the bigger picture of everything is your yearly review that you are doing regularly. In this review you basically retreat from day-to-day work for a week or so, and look back at the past 12 months, and also plan ahead for the upcoming year.

Would you say that this review is like an outline for everything that you are going to do the next year?

Yes, I think it's absolutely essential for me. It's something I started maybe six years ago with my wife. She and I do it together. She has her own projects and I have mine, but we spend that week together. **And it's almost like a holiday that we go on, but then during the mornings I'm kind of looking out to**

everything I hope to do over the next year and I try to make sure that everything is on track with what I wanted to accomplish and to make sure that there is convergence between all my different projects, between my business work and my writing work and my travel.

And I think that's important because for most of the time I'm really focused on all of the things that are in front of me and don't always do a good job of thinking further out. So that's why I take a week to think through the next 12 months and make sure I'm on track with everything.

And then you end up with [some kind of] an outline of each month?

It's not so much an outline of each month. It's more an outline of each project or of each area of my life. Like, I will think about business: Okay, how is my business going now and what do I hope to achieve twelve months from now? I will usually identify maybe a few projects I wanna specifically work on or create and so then I think: Okay, these are my goals for the year in business. The same is true with the writing, the same is true with travel.

With travel, I usually visit about 20 countries a year, and so in December I think ahead to the next year and say: Okay, what are those countries? And then I may actually put some of them in specific months, but for me it's not so much the time placement as it is the overall project and the role and the goal of what I'm trying to do.

So it's again really based on deliverables rather than a concrete plan that's based on a calendar.

Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

You said you try to review your project lists each day. Do you also do some bigger reviews during the year?

You know, I'm supposed to... I say that I do four of them every year, but I think I've been falling behind on that, though. Mostly, right now I'm just doing the big one every year in December and then just as I go along. So I should probably do some more, like quarterly reviews or something.

Okay, cool.

I know you once said in another interview, “Relaxing stresses me out”. Which is really something that I think we all see, because of the huge output that you have. But at the same time you also describe yourself as a bit of an introvert, and you say you benefit from some time alone, like “solitude sessions”... like time you free up just to think about your work.

I personally am a huge fan of idleness, specifically because my brain will get a lot of thinking done during that time - even though I might just be sleeping or having a beer or walking through a park or whatever it is.

Can you relate to this definition of idleness, or do you really get stressed when relaxing and are pretty much “always on”?

(Laughing)

Well, you know, it might be a little bit of an exaggeration to say, “relaxing stresses me out”. I think what I mean is just that **I’m very oriented towards producing and creating and I want to always initiate things and do things. And I feel like if I’m not creating something that I start to feel bad.**

So that's what I mean by that, but **I definitely relate to the concept of solitude and idleness that you describe** and I like to have my beer in the evening, I like to go for a long run... I also... since I travel so much I'm often in transit and I'm on long flights, sitting in airports and on trains or buses, so I try to use some of that time for thinking about things. So I definitely have a lot of solitude, idleness time as well. So maybe it is a balance!

Sure, absolutely! And this is also something that then again will fuel your next project that you do, right? Because I always see this practical benefit from the time I take off... just noticing that many solutions to questions or problems that I had will automatically pop [up] the next time I focus back on them.

Yes, of course. That's great! And I think it does help sometimes to leave projects behind for a little while. And if you're struggling with something you maybe put it down for a week or so... I think that definitely helps with writing. If you're writing longer pieces or manifestos or books or anything it definitely helps to write for a while and then leave it for a while and then come back to it. So I understand that.

Cool! So here's my last question already and it's also the most open one: Do you have any other lessons to share with people who are thinking about taking their work to the road, and become productive anywhere? Specifically related to experiences that you made or challenges that you had to overcome during your own experience?

Yeah, that's a good question! It's quite open-ended. I guess sometimes people ask about motivation. And they ask: How do I do something if I don't feel like doing it? And I always think that's an interesting question!

I think that in some cases there are things that we have to do and we just can push through it or whatever. But I really feel like most **people will find their biggest success and their most fulfilling work when they find a way to orient it around something that they are already motivated to do, as opposed to trying to create motivation for it!**

And in my own life, as I look back to ten years of working for myself and now four years in this writing career, I can definitely say that the projects that have been the most successful and then also, maybe more importantly, the projects that I found to be the most meaningful and fulfilling to me are the ones where

I just was really excited to do them and I felt motivated to do it. And I felt like when I worked on them there was this flow and it was just exactly like what I was supposed to do as opposed to the things that I really had to push myself towards.

I mean, it's an interesting balance because you definitely want to challenge yourself, but I think it's very hard in the long term to push yourself towards something that you're not motivated to do. So when people ask about how I do something, how can I create this career and travel the world or whatever, I always think: Okay, what does that really look like, what are you excited about, what are you motivated to do, and then how can we craft some kind of career, how can we create some kind of value out of that, that other people are also interested in?

So those are the things that I always think about. **Whenever I get stuck I always ask myself: What's the problem here? Why am I not motivated to do this thing and how can I fix that? Maybe I need to change something structurally or maybe I'm just working on the wrong thing!**

And that's a great lesson for itself! But another lesson that's swinging here in the background as well is to also look what is the thing that I want to do and where I can also deliver huge value to other people, just as you have done as well with a lot of success due to that! Because you were also always very focused on what can you deliver to the people, right?

Exactly! That's good and I'm glad you said that! You'll find over time, as I'm sure you have, too, that this is very rewarding and valuable and fulfilling and, you know, people will send you emails saying that they appreciate this thing you did, and it kind of keeps you going and makes you want to do something different.

And then you travel and you meet people who have read your blog or they have heard of you or something and then, when you go on, from wherever you were, you will be thinking about them later. And when you make the next blog post or write the next book or whatever the project is, you'll think: Okay, how can I do a good job for this person? I have to raise my standard, I have to take this responsibility seriously!

So in many ways it's almost like a circle or a cycle of motivation that continues as you go along, and I think it's very positive!

Yeah and I think that all these questions of practical Getting Things Done stuff really come after that, right? If you have this basis of motivation, then you can probably find your own approach of techniques and methods, but this is really the base of it all, if I understand you right.

Yes. I agree. I think they are both important, you know, because... some people are very motivated but they don't really know what to do, they don't know how to apply it. And so that's where I do think productivity tips and things can help. But yes, if you are only gonna have one of those things it's probably much better to have the right motivation and the right perspective!

Cool! Well, Chris, thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences with us! It was very interesting to get this look into your brain and [see how you approach your projects!

Thank you very much as well! It was a big honor and I wish you well!

Links and Resources

Chris' website and blog: <http://chrisguillebeau.com>

A post by Chris on how to do your own annual review: <http://chrisguillebeau.com/3x5/how-to-conduct-your-own-annual-review>

OmniFocus: <http://www.omnigroup.com/products/omnifocus>



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