Nearly all of us travel during our lives. Some of us do so frequently for work and/or pleasure. A select few can, for example, boast of having visited every continent on Earth, or of having visited 50 or 100 countries or more. Only Michael Brein, however, calls himself a “travel psychologist,” relying on Dragon Dictate to turn others’ wayfaring adventures into engaging stories that examine the psychology behind their thrilling, scary, humorous, and intoxicating experiences.

Brein has amassed over 1,600 interviews with fellow travelers since he began recording them in the early 1970s. He used cassette tapes back then, and in 1985 he had 180 of them transcribed at a cost of about $3,000, which would be three to four times that amount today. Now he can simply speak his interviews while listening to them — he graduated to digital audio recorders in the mid-1990s — and complete one hour of interviews in a two-to-three-hour session. Each session includes an initial listen to make notes and mark places that he can skip, as well as time spent thinking about the material.

“The end result is better, clearer interviews,” Brein says. He recently started using MacSpeech Scribe too — rather than wait until he returns to his computer, he listens to the interview on one recorder and speaks it into another, while it’s still fresh in his mind. Then he can transfer the file to his Mac and quickly create a transcript with MacSpeech Scribe. He travels with a MacBook Pro and uses an iMac at home.

Brein plans to turn his enormous archive of travel tales into a series of audio and e-books, starting with a collection drawn from his own experiences: “Tales of a Travel Psychologist: My Weird and Wacky Travel Life.” The series will complement his existing travel guides, which cover worldwide sightseeing via public transportation; they’ve sold about 200,000 copies in print and have made the migration to e-media.

BIRTH OF A SUB-FIELD
Brein’s wanderlust struck him early in life. “Like Forest Gump might have done, I started traveling the world in earnest when I was young,” he recalls. He later earned memberships in the Circumnavigators Club — for circling the globe in one trip — and in the Travelers Century Club, which requires visits to at least 100 countries.

During the mid-1960s, he coined the term “travel psychologist” and applied it to his graduate studies in social psychology at the University of Hawaii. He notes that his attempt to define a new sub-field almost got him thrown out of the graduate program when some of the science-oriented faculty members scrutinizing his presentation said there was “no such thing” as travel psychology. “I walked out,” Brein remembers, “and a couple humanistic psychologists chased me down the hall. They had me come back, and eventually I finished my PhD. I had to create my own niche.”

Not long after, he began his travels. Brein would find himself sitting around a campfire with half a dozen people during an African safari, or organizing nightly storytelling sessions with 35 to 40 passengers on a Russian ship sailing between St.
Petersburg and Moscow. Between 1974 and 1976, he lived out of a VW bus in Europe, teaching classes for the University of Maryland and journeying as far as the Middle East in search of people with stories to tell.

“I had captive audiences everywhere I went,” he says. “I would pass around the recorder, and people would talk. I put a special emphasis on the interview as soon as I heard something psychological. ‘A cape buffalo was charging toward me,’ someone might say, and I would stop and start asking them about that particular moment. What did they feel and think? How did they react? What could they have done differently?”

While Brein doesn’t expect travel psychology to become an official sub-field, he has attracted interest in it through his web site and travel guides. He has even assisted high school and college students who have contacted him with an interest in writing about it.

INFORM, EDUCATE, ENTERTAIN
Brein has begun organizing his stories by type of situation, with over 100 different themes emerging; they will form the structure for future books in the series. He offers an example: “I have about 100 accounts of people being pick-pocketed, everything from incidents on subways to scams pulled on them.” Each story will be prefaced by a discussion of the core issues Brein sees at work, with his psychological analysis following the tale. “My goal is to inform, educate, and entertain,” he says.

Brein adds: “This is my life’s passion; I don’t care if I make a penny from it.” He sees the current trend toward e-publishing as one closely tied to speech recognition software: “Dragon Dictate enables anyone to realize a publishing dream, if you need to get material like this into a digital form. I wouldn’t be able to do this without Dragon Dictate.”