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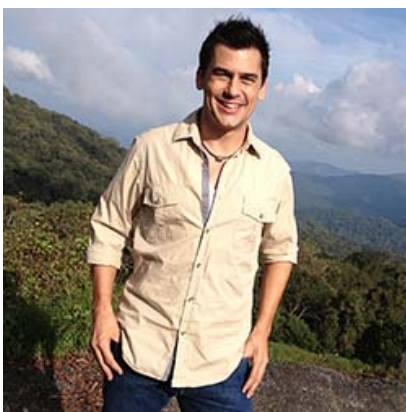
Industry Q&A: Daniel Fraser

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Co-Founder Daniel Fraser's destination management company Smiling Albino offers luxury travelers customizable and unique experiences across Southeast Asia

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Daniel Fraser // © 2016 Smiling Albino

Feature image (above): Smiling Albino has offered customizable tours of Southeast Asian countries since 1999. // © 2016 Smiling Albino

Smiling Albino is a luxury destination management company specializing in customizable vacations for adventurers and families in the Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam, as well as in Nepal. Working regularly with travel agents on a commission basis, Smiling Albino was co-founded by Daniel Fraser in 1999 after he spent several years directly working with and teaching Thailand's royal family. We asked Fraser to share more about the DMC's history and unique brand of travel.

Smiling Albino is a pretty unique name. What is the story behind it?

When we started the company, my business partner and I were sitting on the floor of our tiny apartment, filling out the piles of documents needed to start a business in Thailand, and we got stumped early on by the blank space for company name. We had been so busy traveling, surveying and testing out itineraries on

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The Details

Smiling Albino
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family and friends that an actual company name had slipped our minds.

We wanted a name that was playful, stood out and held some symbolism about our company's roots. I first came to Thailand, "The Land of Smiles," in 1995 at the invitation of the Thai royal family to teach at Chitralada Palace under the direction of Princess Sirindhorn. The name Smiling Albino is a tribute to those early days, when I occasionally was offered the chance to feed the royal family's sacred albino elephants.

What type of traveler is a good fit for your products?

Smiling Albino is for those who don't picture themselves as guided travelers, but who understand what a flawless, custom guided experience can provide. They want to see things that will blow

them away, be active enough to feel it in the evening and journey at their own pace. They want unreconstructed authenticity in food, culture, history and activities, and the kind of enjoyment only travel can bring. They enjoy local, rustic experiences but appreciate luxury accommodation and amenities.

What does an adventure trip with Smiling Albino entail?

Our personal network and attention to detail make our adventurous experiences once-in-a-lifetime memories. A cycling-hiking-kayaking excursion around Angkor led by the author of the most extensive survey ever done on the ancient civilization will admit you into an elite club of individuals who are privy to the reasons behind Angkor's spectacular growth and demise. We have flown travelers into an isolated village in northern Laos by helicopter, where they mounted motorcycles and made their way to the South China Sea on an epic six-day touring adventure to Vietnam. We can show you the wildest corners of Southeast Asia, and introduce you to the even wilder individuals who call it home.

Is offering authentic experiences an important part of what you provide clients?

Authenticity is what we do. We are constantly exploring and on the lookout for new authentic experiences to share with our guests.

Instead of lining up to fight through the crowds at Bangkok's Grand Palace, we'll slip in the side door of nearby Wat Pho for a private monk blessing and then view the Reclining Buddha before the public is let in. We skip the tourist markets and visit traditional workshops only accessible by boat in old riverside communities that have been crafting bronze alms bowls in the same open fire for more than 160 years. We have cycling trips that weave through countryside villages where the children come running out to greet you, marveling at some of the first foreigners they've ever seen.

How does your company distinguish itself from your competitors?

Unlike typical tour companies, we do not outsource our trips to third parties. We know we offer the best of Southeast Asia because we personally scout every area, eat at each restaurant, source and train every guide or host, sleep in every hotel bed, ride the bikes, board the boats and pat the elephants, ensuring every tour is highly original, well-thought-out and oozing value and insider

access. Our efforts are rewarded, as 90 percent of our direct clients are repeats or referrals.

What should folks know about how you make family travel different for consumers?

Family travel is a great educator, but it is important to understand its nuances. For such a trip to be successful, you need to plan for different family members having their own ideas of what is relaxing, enjoyable and interesting.

We excel at delivering well-choreographed trips for these types of groups. We get to know the entire family during the trip-planning stage, so there is little chance that anyone is left wanting more during their travels. With our extensive on-the-ground team, we can offer unparalleled flexibility for families.

Do you have a favorite destination among those you offer?

Northern Thailand is one of our favorite destinations, and it always delivers above and beyond for our guests. There are myriad of activities to be experienced, such as taking bikes on a private longtail boat and heading upriver to remote hill tribe settlements or hiking in former opium country, which is now home to lush expanses of oolong tea plantations.

Clients can also engage with some of our intriguing local friends and can choose between many world-class accommodations, from boutique bamboo villas to five-star hideaways. Of course, northern Thai food is out of this world and distinctly different from other parts of Thailand.

What new destinations or products is Smiling Albino offering?

We recently added some exceptional off-the-beaten-path adventures in rural Cambodia, where we combine active cycling, hiking and kayaking with chilled-out luxury on the south coast. We are also adding more exclusive and luxury options in southern Thailand, as well as working on some locations in Indonesia.



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