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## Smiling Albino rode early wave into luxury's hottest trend

By [Jeri Clausing](#) / July 27, 2016

When Daniel Fraser launched his Asian tour company, Smiling Albino, he says he felt a bit like he was surfing a wave into uncharted territory.

Fraser traveled to Bangkok to teach for Thailand's royal family in 1995 and fell in love with the region, which then was better known as a backpackers' packers paradise than luxury destination.

He said he sensed an opportunity to help Western travelers with high expectations navigate the developing tourism infrastructure and find unique, local adventures.

"It seemed quite natural at the time to jump in and fill this niche," he said.

Bangkok-based Smiling Albino (the name is an homage to when Fraser was given the opportunity to feed the royal family's sacred albino elephants) was founded in 2001. Today it is a thriving player in one of the travel industry's hottest trends: creating the highly personalized and often over-the-top adventures that have replaced opulence as the measure of modern luxury.



A picnic in Myanmar organized by Bangkok-based tour operator Smiling Albino.

Fraser credits his success to local expertise, word-of-mouth, repeat customers and his nontraditional tour operator model.

"Unlike other 'tour' companies, we don't outsource our trips to others," he said. "We personally survey all the elements of our trips: the accommodation, restaurants, transport and all necessary equipment. We run an extensive, ongoing guide-training program. We ensure every trip is highly original, well thought out and oozing value. We micromanage each part all the way through, ensuring a world-class travel experience."

Smiling Albino now operates in six countries, and it works with both agents and individual travelers to develop adventure, cultural and ultra-luxe itineraries.

Fraser says Smiling Albino focuses on meeting the needs of the Western traveler, helping agents and consumers navigate the language barriers and often inconsistent standards of the Asian tourism sector.

"The way of life in Southeast Asia is vastly different," Fraser said, adding that it's one of the most charming reasons to visit.

"Southeast Asia has developed rapidly in recent years, and the cities now provide some of the top luxury experiences in the world," he said. "However, not far away in rural areas, constantly evolving facilities and services can still challenge travelers' expectations. We are experts in how Westerners like to travel, and we can direct you to the places that have the facilities that you need and are comfortable with, which aren't status quo in the region. Lastly, standards and regulations are not always adhered to, so it's imperative to have local knowledge and an updated stable of trusted local suppliers."

The company also prides itself on developing unique experiences and group adventures; Fraser said they've included celebrating the birthday of a National Football League star by flying him into a Thai jungle to host a giant fruit buffet spread for a herd of rescued elephants, and creating a prince's epic motorcycle trip from central Laos to northern Vietnam.

"This is what we live for," he said. "We are always trying to make all of our adventures unique, and [we're] always on the lookout for bizarre and out-of-the-ordinary elements to strengthen itineraries."

*CORRECTION: This insight was updated to correct the year in which Fraser first went to Bangkok (1995) and to clarify his job there at the time; he was a teacher.*



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