

Travel duo's business off the beaten track

Fried 'hoppers on the menu for Smiling Albino

By Susan Mate
Business Edge

Forget the cramped cubicle, office politics and the security of a regular paycheque.

Calgary entrepreneurs Scott Coates and Daniel Fraser have traded in the trappings of corporate life for a distinctly different job half way around the world in Thailand.

As founders and co-owners of three-year-old Smiling Albino, the two former marketing and communications specialists now run a travel company that takes groups of two to eight travellers across the Thai kingdom.

On any given day, you'll likely see the two men travelling with their clutch of clients through cities, villages and the remote countryside aboard everything from mountain bikes, three-wheeled tuk-tuks, longtail boats and even, when the occasion arises, an elephant.

While there are plenty of tour companies operating in Thailand, Smiling Albino has built up a loyal following both in Alberta and around the world due its offbeat approach that takes guests off the main tour-bus circuit and into areas many outsiders never venture.

"Our style is like travelling with friends," says Coates, speaking during a recent trip to Calgary to promote Smiling Albino and touch base with family and friends.

"Most of our clients don't do organized trips - they tell us: 'We don't do tours.' We tell them, neither do we."

The company primarily attracts financially secure professionals from the age of 35-55, but has had guests as young as 10 and as old as 67.

One of Smiling Albino's mantras is the need for travellers to move out of their comfort zone - to use the common squatter toilets, ride an elephant or, perhaps, eat a seasoned fried grasshopper. It's part of what Coates and Fraser, both 30, call getting to know the 'real' Thailand - its sights, people, culture and history.

"We like to engage people in Thai life. We cover the hidden corners of the kingdom."

Travellers can book everything from a one-day trip through Bangkok using "every form of transportation imaginable," says Fraser, to a 12-day cross-country trek.

The two founders, friends since high school, decided to



Smiling Albino photos

Scott Coates and Daniel Fraser, above, chucked the corporate life in Calgary to offer travelling Albertans a new kind of experience in Thailand. Fraser, left, with a Thai student, says the company offers clients the chance to participate in community outreach programs.

leave their Calgary roots three years ago after becoming fascinated by Thailand during previous trips.

Coates worked at media and marketing firms after studying broadcast journalism at SAIT and obtaining his communications degree at Mount Royal College. Fraser studied international business in Texas, and later worked with companies including Calgary-based Venture Communications.

"We left with virtually no money and the idea for an original travel company," says Coates, who along with Fraser has learned to speak and write Thai. The duo's growing ties to the community over the past three years have led to their creation of several unique outreach programs.

Under the programs, Smiling Albino patrons can take a day, a week or several months away from their holiday itinerary and give back to the community.

Opportunities include teaching English to students in Bangkok's eastern suburbs, providing English instruction to students in the northern province of Chiang Rai and mentoring orphaned children at Bangkok's Phayathai Babies' Home. A fourth volunteer program allows travellers to spend time at the Highland Farm and Gibbon Rehabilitation Society.

The company - which has several staff based in Thailand and part-owners Sue and Todd Kuipers based in Calgary - hopes to begin approaching corporations to promote interest in team-building retreats that will allow employees on retreats to help needy communities.

"There are several ideas ticking around in our brains now. One would be to spend some time at Highland Farm Gibbon

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Sanctuary, building a new gibbon enclosure as a group. We would map out blueprints together, assign jobs to each person, buy supplies with a budget and then go to the farm and complete the task as a team.

"Others would include team bamboo raft-building on the Mekhong River, a movie-making workshop and a James Bond theme night adventure around Bangkok. Our dream is to have a team of engineers rebuild an irrigation dam for a poor village."

The company's efforts to integrate its business - and its customers - into Thai life earns praise from former client Kim Varey, a chartered accountant who spent two weeks travelling in Thailand with 16-year-old daughter Becca Gaede.

"It was just a hoot. They say they want to take you out of your comfort zone, and we liked that. You learn so much and you meet so many wonderful people on the way."

As do many past Albino customers, Varey and her daughter still stay in touch with Fraser and Coates and, in fact, hosted a presentation by them for travelling friends and family in her High River home. On the menu? The green curry she learned to cook in Thailand.

Web watch:

www.smilingalbino.com

