

Calgarian's exploits showcase Thai culture

By Lisa Monforton, Calgary Herald

December 16, 2011



Daniel Fraser reacts to the size of an insect being sold for culinary purposes at a market in Bangkok.

Photograph by: Courtesy , Daniel Fraser, Smiling Albino

When Daniel Fraser moved to Bangkok a little more than decade ago to start an adventure travel company, he never expected to become a local celebrity.

But he has, and the Calgary native seems as stunned by this as anyone, because this is no small feat in a city of nine million people.

It has nothing to do with the fact that he and his business partner Scott Coates have run Smiling Albino in Bangkok for more than 10 years and seen it grow into a successful custom travel company.

Rather, it's Fraser's newest gig as a web television show host that is getting him recognized by locals as he goes about his business on the frenetic streets of Bangkok.

"It's been such a high," he says of his new-found fame. Locals have stopped him on the street to suggest topics for episodes.

Long Krung, which in Thai means “to be fascinated — and lost and bewildered — in Bangkok,” is the name of the weekly national program aired by Thai PBS. It has drawn as many as 50,000 viewers per episode.

In the midst of taping the second season of 30-minute episodes, Fraser continues to explore some of the stranger facets of Thai culture. Like the custom of coffin napping, which is believed to ward off evil spirits; learning why insects are an integral part of the Thai diet; and, discovering the oddities of Thai street language. There’s even an episode on Thai family values. He’s interviewed politicians, celebrities, taxi drivers, the homeless and chefs — all to learn about every angle of the culture.

“I don’t claim to be an expert; I’m on a discovery,” says Fraser.

Fraser’s sense of wonder takes him to places no Thai broadcaster has gone before.

“It’s a refreshing look at Thai-ness through the eyes of an outsider.” Fraser says. “The show tries to make sense of Thai-ness to foreigners.”

Fraser’s foray into Thai culture began before Smiling Albino. His first job in the country was working for the crown prince of Thailand as a “glorified English tutor.” He taught at the king’s private school and wrote speeches, and got to see Thailand “from the inside out.”

The travel company’s name recognizes Thailand’s reputation as a country whose people are always smiling and the Thai white elephants. Now, more than a decade after he founded Smiling Albino, he’s using the show to educate the rest of the world about the fascinating culture and country.

Because he’s a westerner, he gets to ask questions about the culture that Thais would never ask. That’s because “social harmony” is very important, he says. The online show has become a phenomenon, says Fraser, because “Thailand is undergoing a transformation, searching for its identity.”

Thailand has had its share of hardships and tragedies in recent years: the tsunami in 2004, the 2006 coup by the Royal Thai army against the government of the day, and most recently the devastating flooding that affected the lives of millions of people.

Fraser’s personality is infectious and, at times, laugh-out-loud hilarious.

As show host, he plays the part of a wide-eyed westerner, seemingly gobsmacked by some of the most peculiar customs of the country, while looking like he’s having a blast doing it. English subtitles complement his “not perfect” Thai.

In one episode, Fraser goes on a mission to find out why Thais eat insects.

He starts out at a night market teeming with people, buses, scooters and rows upon rows of stalls selling everything under the sun, including large vats of bugs. He approaches one vendor who's hawking steaming and freshly deep fried giant grasshoppers, and asks how do they taste.

"Nice," she answers.

"Nice?" he asks incredulously, looking with a wide-eyed grin into the camera. With a shudder, he gulps a grasshopper down, and exclaims, "Yuck. You call this delicious?" The vendor nods yes.

"It is not delicious," he says, looking into the camera. "It tastes like oil and soil."

It's this kind of curiosity, authenticity and joie de vivre that has served Fraser and Coates over the years in building the success of Smiling Albino.

If You Go

For more information on details and upcoming trips - from food to motorcycle tours - go to smilingalbino.com.

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