

Smiling Albino gives tours a good name



DEBORAH STOKES
Inside Travel

Scott Coates is cocky in a way that can be forgiven in a guy who's just turned 30, is living in one of the most exotic cities in the world and is making bags of money doing what he loves.

The Calgary native is a co-founder, with his high-school buddy, Daniel Fraser, of Smiling Albino, a Bangkok-based travel company that has been selling upscale adventure tours of Thailand for the past four years. "Only we don't do tours," he hastens to add.

He speaks the truth. Smiling Albino has hit upon the novel approach of taking small groups of travellers (a maximum of eight) to the kind of places usually reserved for people who live there and are well-connected.

Mr. Fraser arrived in Thailand in 1995 on a program to teach English and was assigned to the royal household. He even taught some of the princesses. He quickly found himself on Thailand's inside track (and, indeed, one of his new acquaintances became an investor and silent business partner in his travel company). Mr. Coates joined his friend and the two launched the business in 2000.

Now, Mr. Coates says, "We are busy from sun up to sun down."

Clients on one of Smiling Albino's five- to 12-day packages get the benefit of the two men's inside track. That might involve sitting ringside at a Thai boxing match one day, kayaking down the Mekong River the next or mountain biking through Thailand's most northern province.

Each night, travellers sleep in a four-star boutique hotel with Western amenities and a pool. Eating is also first-rate, whether from the best stall on the street or Bangkok's finest restaurants. And there is always time for the beach.

The 12-day Siamese Dream package running this summer costs US\$1,800 per person, including guides, all transportation (bicycles, flights, scooters, boats

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and elephants), accommodation and most meals. The flight to Bangkok is extra.

It is the sort of non-tour that is appealing to the 30-45 age group. Active holidays have eclipsed resort stays, but this group wants their exotic adventures to come with comforts. They also have the money but not the time to discover the best places on their own.

"We consider ourselves pretty solid Thai experts. We speak Thai, read and write it," Mr. Coates says.

The company's unusual name has no mystical Thai meaning. "The Thais are famous for their smiles, and the King of Thailand has a collection of albino elephants," Mr. Coates explains. (Though one friend pointed out, "It could also mean two white guys in a sea of Asians.")

The two entrepreneurs couldn't have picked a worse time to start a travel company in that part of the world — what with terrorism, the war in Iraq, SARs, avian flu, even bombings.

Although the Bali blast was thousands of kilometres away, Westerners tend to lump that part of the world together.

"It was pretty frustrating at times," Mr. Coates says.

Maybe it's the name — albinos are considered lucky in some cultures — but somehow Thailand's many gods seem to have smiled down on them. It no doubt helped that the two foreigners also built in an outreach angle to their business: They take volunteers from the West who want to do good on their vacations to teach English in Thai schools or help out in orphanages.

"We've grown the business and paid the bills and made a profit — in these times," Mr. Coates says. He says the company is hosting around 400 adventure travel clients a year and has grown to seven employees.

Word is spreading. When I met him, Mr. Coates was in Toronto on his way to New York for an interview with *The New York Times*. He has been in Calgary since May, taking advantage of his annual trip home to pick up Alberta's 2004 Provincial Award Celebrating Excellence (PACE). The award is given to Albertans who have used their post-secondary education to grow a career while benefiting the global community.

Wearing a custom-tailored Egyptian cotton shirt — "only \$40 in Bangkok" — Mr. Coates can't stop tugging at his silk tie. That's a dead giveaway this is not someone who is usually wearing a suit in a sterile office building.

Lucky him.

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dstokes@nationalpost.com