

A road less travelled
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Most people experience a time when a choice can lead to an entirely different direction in life.

This crossroads moment came for Scott Coates five years ago when he gave up his chosen career in journalism to follow the unfamiliar path of co-owning an adventure travel company called *Smiling* *Albino* in Thailand.

"It's been just an incredibly exciting way to live and a lot of fun, I don't regret it for a moment. The worst-case scenario for me is I move home and get a regular job, so that's a pretty good worst-case scenario," says the semi-Calgary-based Coates, who was on Prince Edward Island recently to revisit some people and places of his past.

His Island roots sprouted from age eight to 13 when he grew up in Eliot Park just outside Cornwall.

"It was actually kind of neat, I drove by the old house the other day and there was actually a kid standing on the front lawn looking at me look at him, probably wondering, 'What's this guy doing looking at my house?' " he says, laughing.

Growing up in a suburban P.E.I. community surrounded by woods and farmers fields was a fort-building, dirt-biking-riding, just-hanging-out dream come true for his adventurous side. Times really haven't changed that much. He's seriously into the great outdoors but the Thailand locale is decidedly different.

In the years leading up to his big move, his family relocated from P.E.I. to Calgary where he spent the rest of his growing up years, then studied journalism with radio and television broadcasting in mind.

He and future business partner Daniel Fraser had bantered the idea for an experiential tour company about for a while, but in July 1999, Fraser, who was up for a big promotion in his field of advertising, was at his own crossroads. At the same time, Coates had just graduated with his journalism degree and was offered a job

with CBC-TV in Edmonton.

The topic of the travel company cropped up yet again.

“We said, 'You know what, we're coming up to a fork in the road . . . and I said, 'I don't want to want to keep talking about this, we're either going to stop talking about it or we're doing it. And if we're doing it, we're leaving within three months,' ” Coates remembers.

“So we left with \$4,000. Money wasn't the important thing, it seemed that just getting there and starting to do it was.”

Thailand was their chosen spot because Coates had been there a few times before and Fraser had worked with the royal family of Thailand through a teaching exchange program in the mid-1990s.

“Thailand was a pretty easy choice. We wanted to operate in an area that had a tropical locale, which Thailand does, and was somewhere really different, which Thailand is,” Coates says.

“I think if we had thought about it, it probably wouldn't have happened. It was one of those things where we didn't think about it too much and so it never seemed strange to be doing it. To this day it doesn't really seem strange.”

They bunked with a friend for the first month, then spread out through the countryside, mapping out-of-the-way places they wanted to include in their travels.

Their target market was the middle-aged crowd with some travel experience who wanted a ground level vacation without the roughing-it backpacker feel. The multi-sport adventure idea was to travel by bicycle, boat and motorscooter to lesser-known locations.

Getting around in Thailand at first was linguistically difficult for Coates.

“When we landed (in September 1999) I didn't speak a word of Thai. I speak Thai now and I read and write it,” he says.

“I was in Montreal just the other day and it was weird to realize I'm bilingual but my second language was not coming in handy (in Canada).”

By mid-2000, the business partners were ready for their first 12-

day trip.

"It was a very comprehensive trip and we did sort of go, 'Holy mackerel, now we've got people who want to do the trip, now what do we do?' " Coates says.

"Without a doubt it was certainly very nervewracking in the very early days knowing you have people who have paid a good sum of money, not just for an afternoon or an evening, but for 12 days worth of a trip. Luckily everything came off pretty darned well and everyone had a pretty great time."

The good times have been rolling ever since. Coates lives about nine months of the year in Thailand, Fraser resides there almost full-time. This at-home feel makes the community service side of their *Smiling* *Albino* company all the more meaningful.

The two met an American man and his Thai wife who care for abused or abandoned Gibbon apes which are often kept as pets or entertainment for tourists.

"They now have 37 of these animals that they care for out of their own pocket so we adopted one. He has a curved back because when he was little, a soldier who owned him kicked him and broke his back, then his back healed crooked," says Coates, who says the company now supports four apes.

Because public schools don't have budgets to attract foreign teachers, Coates and Fraser also thought it might be a good idea to provide hands-on English lessons for a few weeks at the junior and high school in a small Thai town near the Burmese border where they spend a night on all their trips.

They designed curriculum with a real emphasis on hands-on fun and got \$400 from the Rotary Club of Bangkok south to buy supplies and put the volunteer teachers up in a hotel.

"The program is free of charge to the school, the 500 kids there got two weeks of English instruction. So it was a great opportunity for these kids to get some exposure to westerners that they would normally not have in this little town," says Coates, who now helps to arrange twice-yearly teaching times with volunteer candidates, with continued support from the same rotary club.

Coates and Fraser now operate a similar program in an elementary school in eastern Bangkok. They also place volunteers at an

orphanage with a program called Bridge the Gap for children who are in the process of being adopted by a western family to help them to adjust to their future home.

Now after five years of living large abroad, Coates says it was providence, pure and simple.

"I don't necessarily believe in fate but I think that sometimes when you get the feeling that you should do something and you do it, things naturally seem to work out," he says.

"I just can't imagine what I'd be doing if I didn't do what I'm doing now. I think everything I've learned from landing somewhere, not speaking the language and never having had a company, I've certainly learned way more doing that for five years than I could have doing anything back in Canada."

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Illustration: Former Cornwall resident Scott Coates revisits some of the P.E.I. sites he remembers from his childhood. Five years ago this adventurous Calgary man did a complete career about face when he gave up the prospect of a television broadcaster job to co-found and co-operate the Thailand-based *Smiling* *Albino* adventure tour company.