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CELEBRATING SMILING ALBINO'S 20TH ANNIVERSARY

Twenty years. Two decades. A monumental anniversary for any company. The year 2020 that marks that milestone for the luxury adventure travel gurus at Smiling Albino. A travel company which got started to challenge the conventions of what travel is, and has since become one of the industry's premier names in Southeast Asia. It's a bit ironic that such a monumental anniversary is celebrated during the time when the world shuts down and tourism virtually ceases. But these resilient folks are using it as a time to reset, preparing to be ready more than ever when travel resumes to showcase their amazing experiences in Southeast Asia to guests from here and around the world.

Founded in 2000 by two Canadians, Daniel Fraser (present CEO) and Scott Coates who left the company in 2013, Smiling Albino started by offering grass-roots, off-the-beaten-path experiences in Thailand, namely Bangkok, Chiang Rai and the Golden Triangle in the north, and Krabi in the south. For several years

Dan and Scott were a two-man show, simultaneously traveling the country creating experiences, running the operations, and hosting guests alongside local guides.

The focus since day one has been to experience Southeast Asia like a local with seamless comfort. These adventures are tailored to private guests, not large groups, and deliver a level of value and access that travelers could not accomplish on their own. "On many of our trips we bring guests over for drinks in our friend's art studio in a little hilltop community in the Golden Triangle, or we invite local families to join us for boat rides and BBQ's on the Mekong River where few others ever travel to. Our guests felt connected right from day one. There were no tour buses, flags, or name lists. This felt real and fun, like an adventure is supposed to be!"

Smiling Albino's local and safe and fun approach appealed to the middle class and upper-middle-class





travelers and families from Canada, USA, UK, and beyond. Soon they were upgrading simpler hotels around the region and clearly offering a unique blend of high-class service, authentic adventure, and comfortable luxury.

Pursuing this niche as a boutique operator contributed to Smiling Albino being able to build close relationships across Southeast Asia that is seldom achieved by large multinational travel firms catering to broader masses. "A major upside for us is that we got to know local people in the small communities," says Dan. "We built relationships that are personal, authentic, and still standing to this day."

Between 2006-2010, the company began offering similar experiences in Cambodia and Vietnam and Nepal, and then Laos and Myanmar. This growth was fueled by happy customers asking for trips beyond Thailand. But Smiling Albino didn't take the growth opportunities lightly and wanted to ensure that they were true to their mission to truly add value to their new destinations, or not do them at all.

"The mission of finding new partners was a process of relationship building. We got to know future partners well, and we wanted to understand their hopes and dreams. We created a vision for what Smiling Albino was about and how this type of tourism could transform the guest experience, and thus transform

the lives of the team. We worked together on ways to provide a meaningful guest experience in their city or region, and how to do it differently. This became part of the company DNA and absolutely contributed to our successful expansion."

Unanticipated luxury, crafted through creativity and exploration, is what the company is most known for. One example is a recent one-off experience in Northern Thailand. "After an afternoon hiking in the lush jungle, we arrived with our guests at a remote jungle village. Waiting for us were showers, towels, robes, and slippers - all pre-arranged by Smiling Albino. Once the guests were cleaned up from the hike, we led them to a natural hot spring converted into an in-ground hot tub where guides were waiting to serve them Gin & Tonics, followed by hot tub time, and the highlight: Thai massage that we'd arranged by inviting several masseuses from the nearest town out for the occasion. "The moment was so unexpected and the guest's favourite memory is the relaxation and 5-star treatment the received in the middle of the jungle. Those are the moments you never forget," says Dan.

Beyond crafting memorable moments, Smiling Albino is conscious about its impact on the locals they interact with all over the region. "We communicate and work with local villagers and entrepreneurs to ensure that any effect on the local environment is



positive. We aim to support the villages by having conversations to see what they need and how to contribute. We ensure that we're never exploiting locals for the benefits of an overseas guest. The benefits have to be mutual. This is really important to us," says Danielle Dranoff, Head of Marketing & Product for Smiling Albino.

As they continue into their 20th year amidst a pandemic, Smiling Albino is looking forward. They are excited about what travel in a new world means. In addition to planning for the return of international guests, the company has recently launched a set of travel experiences geared to Thailand locals and expats. "We are excited to share our knowledge and expertise with our local community." And these

experiences are not your average day out. Hidden villages, alleyways you never knew existed, and fun twists on traditional favorites. They're also a great way to support local businesses. "These are day trips for the Thailand residents who feel like they've seen it all. We love showing people the Bangkok you never knew that you never knew!"



Learn more about their new experiences at blog.smilingalbino.com/local or by contacting them at mahouts@smilingalbino.com.

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Website: www.nichehealth.org

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Website: <https://mqdc.com>

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