

LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

THAILAND Robb Report

Rare, by Definition

Inside E18HTEEN SEVEN,
One Bangkok's park-fronting
residence. An address the
discerning have already found.

Creators and Collectors

A celebration of vision and taste



The Experience Architects

Between them, Smiling Albino and Remote Lands have spent nearly half a century designing trips that didn't exist before the client asked. Bangkok's two defining luxury travel houses, celebrating 25 and 20 years.



One of Thailand's joys is its perennial nature, the skies clearing at the start of cool season, and the greening of rice paddies with the rains. Yellow "Dok Khun" flowers pop from Thailand's national Ratchaphruek tree just before the annual Songkran festivities, while seasonal fruit harvests transform local markets, roadside stands, and restaurants. Lovers of mangoes rejoice every April when the "Nam Dok Mai" variety peaks, and "the king of fruits," Durian, announces itself sometime in June, making its aromatic presence known everywhere from ice cream parlours to overflowing pick-up trucks.

Just as dependable as Thailand's flower and fruit seasons is the constancy of accolades for long-time travel operators Smiling Albino and Remote Lands, both of which maintain home offices in Bangkok. The former, which officially launched in 2000, just fêted its 25th anniversary in February, while the latter will celebrate its 20th throughout the year. The two

companies regularly appear in "Best of" lists and in recommendations from the likes of *AFAR*, *National Geographic*, and *Forbes Travel Guide*. Once again, *Condé Nast Traveler* recognized Smiling Albino's Dan Fraser and Remote Lands' Catherine Heald as Top Travel Specialists 2026. Heald also received a spot on Travel + Leisure's A-List. Yet, while their respective companies both specialize in ultra-luxury, the two have sailed distinct courses to their positions as experts in Thailand and across Asia.

For Fraser, the Canadian co-founder and CEO of Smiling Albino, immersion into Thailand began in 1995, when he took a gap year from college to teach English on the grounds of Royal Chitralada Palace in Bangkok. Because the Royal Family owns and protects the kingdom's sacred white elephants, Fraser chose the name Smiling Albino as a form of respect, to honor Thai culture. First, however, he returned to university in Texas. Having fallen in love with his host country, he convinced his friend Scott Coates to join him in

Top: Smiling Albino sets the table at an undisclosed location in Laos.

SMILING ALBINO



launching a business. Fraser recalls, “In October 1999, we landed in Bangkok with the intention to start a cool, grassroots, very local, fun, travel company. That was our mission. But we needed to learn to walk the walk and talk the talk.”

Fraser and Coates initially pursued their vision in the city’s eastern suburbs, where they began learning Thai. Soon, they hit the road, veered off the backpacker circuit, and plunged into the backcountry. “We rode motorcycles and mountain bikes around remote parts of Thailand, trying to integrate as much as possible with local people,” says Fraser. “I know that sounds cliché, but we stayed in simple village huts, homestays, and temples where nobody spoke a word of English. We became more and more comfortable navigating with our then-broken Thai. It gave us an incredible amount of confidence for what is possible.”

“This fantasy experience, it kind of exists between film narratives and real life. It’s truly magical.”

Luxury came to Smiling Albino almost by accident, when they realized many of their guests were wealthy. “They were looking for off-the-grid experiences, but they didn’t want to stay in guest houses,” Fraser recalls. “So we started modifying the luxury element to suit them. With the spirit of gritty original experiences. An inch off the map is what we always say.” It’s a principle the company applies wherever they build itineraries. “Bangkok’s a great example,” he explains. “10,000 people a day go through the Grand Palace, but if you look at a map and go an inch, maybe just a few blocks, there’s an absolute stunning temple that nobody visits.” The trick is balancing these moments with the big sites. Fraser says, “Of course, you want



to see the Grand Palace, but now we’re gonna sneak into the canals of Thonburi and visit a village where no foreigners go.”

Today, most of their guests want high-end hotels, the “ultra-luxury cocoon,” as Fraser describes it. “So that’s 75% of our market.” The other 25%, he says, are “people that trust our instincts inherently when we say something like, Hey, let’s do a three-night trip in Isaan, using Loei as the anchor.” One such excursion—packed with ancient ghost dances, jet-skiing the Mekong, a helicopter jump to Three Whales Rock—led to even more intricate itineraries. When a return guest signed up for his third go-round, Smiling Albino led him on a six-day, seven-night adventure through Laos. Fraser recalls, “We privatized a cave system and kayaked it for seven kilometers. In one cavern, we had a mermaid troupe submerged under the water.”



Above: Dan Fraser rocks Hua Lumphong for Smiling Albino’s 25th birthday bash.

Left: Dan Fraser (center front) and the Smiling Albino team exemplifying their “local meets luxury” philosophy while sampling Bangkok street food.



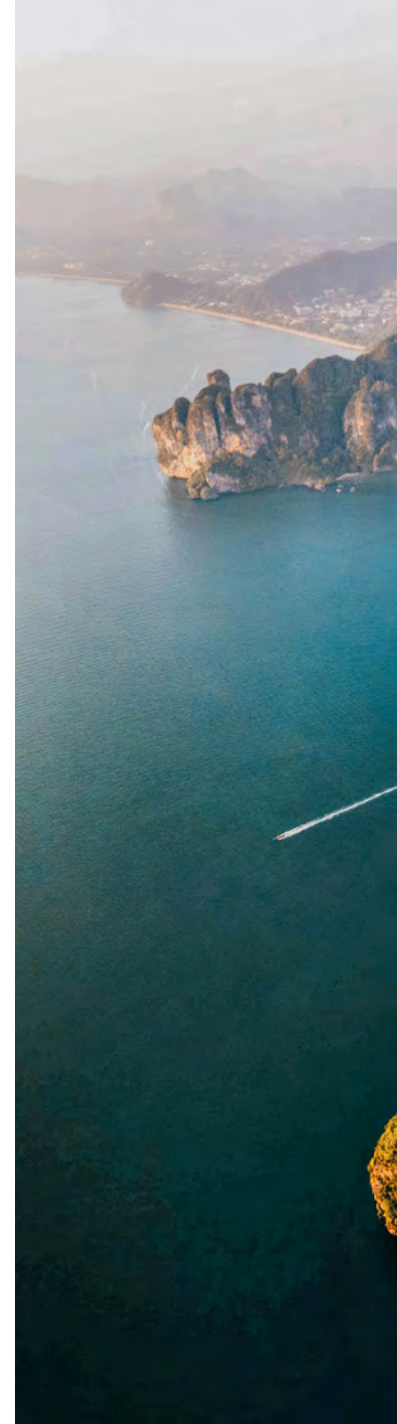
Another day, after picnicking on a river island, they transferred into local vehicles. Fraser says, “We drove out into the rice paddies and had a paramotor team waiting, then hopped in the paramotors and flew to a completely different field where we had set up a champagne team and a martial arts performance. We needed to be at the landing site at exactly 4:45 because that’s when the light and the sunset all hit perfectly. And our guest just said, This is beyond travel. This fantasy experience, it kind of exists between film narratives and real life. It’s truly magical.”

As part of ongoing anniversary celebrations, Smiling Albino has teamed up with hotel designer Bill Bensley to offer opportunities for private and exclusive buyouts at his spectacular Chiang Mai residence, Estancia Botanica, effective from May 1st. And back in February, Fraser and his team rented Hua Lamphong train station for their birthday bash, transforming the space into a club straight out of a Baz Luhrmann movie. With a Roaring 1920s theme, they rolled out the red carpet and screened a short AI-enhanced comedic film depicting the company’s history. Coates and Fraser reunited for a skit about the very beginning. An acrobatic dance troupe entertained, musicians rocked and played Isaan country music (“molam”), and a DJ took revelers deep into the night.

Remote Lands’ CEO & Co-Founder, Catherine Heald, works a different type of magic for her guests. With her business partner Jay Tindall, she coined the now-ubiquitous term “Travel Designer” and has been offering exclusive Aman Private Jet Expeditions since 2013. But she began working in Asia back in the late 80s. After graduating from Barnard College (at Columbia University), she worked on Wall Street as a systems engineer while also pursuing an MBA. Then, in 1987, with \$1,000 in her pocket, she left school, landed in Hong Kong, and took a job selling Apple Computers. She traveled all over Asia, and started the world’s first travel e-book company. Then in 1994, after returning to New York, she founded Wanderlust Interactive, a software company that licensed *the Pink Panther* cartoon to teach children about different cultures. She took Wanderlust public

in 1996, becoming the youngest woman CEO of a publicly-traded company at age 33. But by the turn of the century, she was feeling the pull of Asia. Seeing a gap in the market, she teamed up with Tindall, who she knew from Hong Kong, to launch a business that would focus exclusively on ultra-luxury travel across the continent.

In 2006, Remote Lands opened with offices in Bangkok and in NYC. That was a different time, before the social media buzz around now-popular destinations. Heald says, “When we first started, people were not going to Asia much. People thought I was crazy. Like, why would you focus on Asia? Why don’t you do Europe? That’s where people want to go. I said, Well, because Asia is what I know. It’s what I’m passionate about. And so from day one, that’s what it was. And turns out we were a little bit ahead of our time. When interest started really spiking, we were there, we were established. For once in my life, I was in the right place at the right time.”



Top: Paramotors jump over rice paddies in Smiling Albino’s custom adventure in Laos.

Left: Catherine Heald offers welcome for Remote Lands’ Aman Jet Expeditions.



would fit 150 on commercial airlines. “We usually only take fourteen to sixteen,” she says, “So it’s more comfortable, and people don’t have to sit on sofas.” This spring’s “Grandest Tour 2026” took guests to seven Aman resorts in seven different countries, all on one three-week journey.

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Another signature trip to evolve naturally is their Everest Base Camp Trek, led by Jamling Tenzing Norgay. Heald says, “His father was Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, who was the first successful summiter with Sir Edmund Hillary. That’s a small group trip. And we actually privatize Everest Base Camp and take it over right after all the other climbers have just left.” From here, Norgay and his team lead guests to places off the beaten trekking routes, but not to the summit. “We take helicopters strategically to avoid the crowds,” Heald adds. “It’s not super hardcore. This is more like trekking in luxury.”

Remote Lands’ 20th anniversary is also its first without co-founder, Jay Tindall, who passed away unexpectedly last summer. His daughter now works for the company. Heald says, “We have a special itinerary for twenty years, a twenty-night itinerary going to a lot of places where we give back. And as you would know in Southeast Asia, that’s a big thing. Apart from that, we’re just doing what we’ve always done.”

Christopher White

Heald and Tindall also took a fresh approach to growth. She explains, “In the tech business, people would just go and raise a whole bunch of money and hire a zillion people and grow way too quickly, have too many growing pains. So I wanted to do things completely differently. It’s been all organic.” For example, in 2013, a former employee suggested Remote Lands launch exclusive private jet tours with Aman. Heald recalls, “She said we should be much smaller and better, with private cars, drivers, guides, to be able to go into places and be just more intimate, a lot more intimate. Other companies out there take like fifty, sixty people. So that’s a completely different experience from what we do.” Their custom Airbus ACJ220 jets seat just nineteen passengers—but

Above left: Birdseye view of the karsts and waters of Krabi.

Above right: Remote Lands visit to Bangkok’s Wat Paknang.

REMOTE LANDS