

Up Country on Two Wheels

Originally from Canada, SCOTT COATES has lived in Southeast Asia since 1999 when he moved to develop experiential travel company Smiling Albino (www.smilingalbino.com). An avid adventurer, writer, aspiring photographer and lover of the outdoors, he's consulted for multinational companies, spoken to groups around the world and relishes in discovering the next big thing. He currently calls Bangkok home when he's not exploring the less-traveled trail.



Scott at Mount Everest Base Camp, Tibet

Peering through the scope of a gun into Myanmar I wondered what life was like in that town so close, yet so far away? Muang Yawng, an outpost a handful of kilometers from the Thai border in Chiang Rai province, is off-limits to foreigners and far from any legal border crossing, yet there it was, in the near distance. More importantly, one might ask, is how did I end up here?



Scott riding near the Thai-Myanmar border

"Cheers," my future business partner Daniel and I said, clinking two pints of Canadian microbrew at a Calgary, Canada pub. It was July 1999 and we'd just decided to move to Thailand to develop a highly-specialized travel company that would dedicate itself to customized, handmade adventures. We were 26 years old and never questioned our ability to start such an enterprise from scratch, despite only having \$4,000 USD between us. Two days short of three months later, September 30, we hit Thai soil and began working on our project: Smiling Albino. A new leader in experiential travel was born and two lives were sent down a winding, unknown path.

“**Sitting on an oversized tire tube drifting down the Mekong River between Thailand and Laos, a fisherman watched me just as closely as I him.**”



Approaching Doi Chang, Chiang Rai province

The new business took us many places, and with the new experiences came new realizations. Sitting on an oversized tire tube drifting down the Mekong River between Thailand and Laos, a fisherman watched me just as closely as I him. His graceful tossing of a simple round net was the result of a lifetime of practicing. Likely handmade, like his father's nets, and his father's before him, a life of sustenance was in action.

An outcropping of rocks with sandy banks provided the perfect impedance to stop, slow down, and watch this master of the net, while grilling some pork skewers I'd brought along.

You could leave me with that net for days and I wouldn't net a single fish. Yet I could start a travel company that brings people to see these lives in action. What a puzzle! We're the all product of our environments and this fisherman likely couldn't write my business plan any better than I could work his net. But one task and talent is not mightier than the other.

Hot coals making the skewers sizzle, I munched away with some sticky rice and chili dip, nodding now and then at the man as he showed off his catch. Connections, that's what travel is all about. I relished the opportunity to drift on a tube down this storied river. Luckily I find myself here a few times a year, trading glances of life with locals, sharing simple, yet extremely rich exchanges.



Mountain range along the Nepal-Tibet border



Scott trekking in Nepal with the Annapurna Range in the background

I've been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to travel like few others get to, in this job. The rotor blades echoed through the valley below. At first a gentle 'thump', quickly building into a chorus of 'whumps', our chopper came into view. At 3,000 m, we couldn't all get down in one go – the air's still thin here. We'd been trekking for five days along the border of Nepal and Tibet, about 100 km northeast of Kathmandu, and our chariot back to civilization, beer and pizza had arrived.

Sitting with our head cook Manbakta as the first four guests were shuttled 1,000 m below to ease the load in thin air, we chatted about the days behind us, and how lucky I felt to have trekked with him on three occasions. Marveling at the cost of a 45-minute helicopter ride back to Kathmandu (as opposed to two days walking and six hours in a car), he didn't express a moment of envy about our stylish end to the trek, though he would be returning on foot. After all, "work is work," said Manbakta with a grin. Following 10 years of civil war, he and his countrymen were extremely happy to have tourists coming back to their country, providing much needed employment. "We don't care if they walk, paddle or fly, just as long as they keep coming," he smiled.



Helicoptering out of our trek in Nepal, near the border with Tibet

“
'We don't care if [the tourists] walk, paddle or fly, just as long as they keep coming,' he smiled.
 ”

The 'whumps' returned, we threw all the bags in and the final lucky two passengers jumped aboard. We waved and plunged to 2,000 m, plucked our companions from a rice field hanging off the side of a terraced mountain, and glided back to the city.

Washing a warm pepperoni slice down with a cold mouthful of Gorkha beer, I was struck by how we live, travel and work. While sleeping in the finest hotels, eating three gourmet meals a day on the trail, enjoying full-serviced trekking with a crew setting-up and tearing-down daily, and topping it off with a helicopter journey out, I almost felt guilty about the amount we were spending compared to the material wealth locals have. But Manbakta's words popped into my head. Along the way, he'd explained, there were a lot of people working as a result of our visit: hotels, restaurants, planes, drivers, guides, and porters, all earning a living.

Every job is valuable and it's a heck of a thing when you can have fun, learn about a culture, make friends and provide employment at the same time.

Sometimes it was just the discovery of stunning new locations before others got there that caused me to sit back in awe. "You want a boat ride on beautiful river, Mister?" We turned to reply to the owner of a simple wooden boat, "sure, why not?"

Here we were in Kampot, Cambodia, about four hours after setting out from the capital of Phnom Penh by motorcycle with little planned besides relaxing, having fun and exploring somewhere totally new.

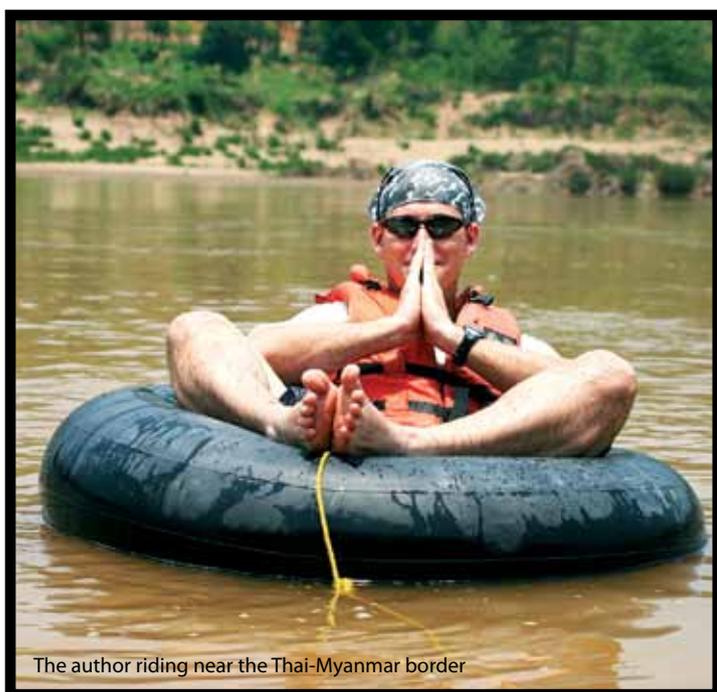
Putting up the Kampot River with the 1,000m high Bokor Mountain as our backdrop, we marveled at where we were in the world. Planes have greatly shortened traditionally long and arduous journeys and a day that started in Bangkok saw us cruising up-river in southern Cambodia later that afternoon. This was a moment we'd remember as beating the crowds before it caught on, took off and became a regular part of travelers' diaries.

“ This was a moment we'd remember as beating the crowds before it caught on, took off and became a regular part of travelers' diaries. ”

Lazing the next day at a luxury residence designed by Khmer architectural legend Vann Molyvann, in the nearby and even sleepier town of Kep, the Gulf of Thailand's sparkle consumed our concentration. Silence dominated. Nothing needed to be said. We'd arrived at a far-flung, but now very reachable corner, just before the silence would be broken.

They say starting a business is like climbing a mountain. In our case, this was literally true. "Hey...hey...hey, wait up," grumbled my friend Greg from the switchback below. We'd been climbing for 18km and were just a few hundred meters from the 5,200m summit. Our bikes creaked underneath with each pedal-stroke and the pounding of our hearts was so thunderous, it almost hurt the ears. This was Tibet and Everest Base Camp was just two days away.

Four not-fit-enough friends had set off for a 15-day biking epic from Lhasa, Tibet to Kathmandu, Nepal with a two-night stopover at Everest Base Camp thrown in. Physically and mentally unprepared, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: one committed to without having considered the mental and physical challenges, and firmly embraced by three good friends. Two days later, sitting on a lawn chair next to my tent and a Tibetan monastery at 5,200m, Everest glistened, its peak looking much closer than 3.5km above. I grabbed binoculars, gently focused the lenses and gazed at it – the highest point on earth – right there, right in front of me. **It's times like these where I really appreciate my one-of-a-kind job.** "There it is," said the Thai soldier as I peered through his scope, "One of the most lawless places in Burma, Muang Yawng." Just 10km by dirt bike on rough, challenging dirt track from the charming Thai town of Doi Mae Salong, known for its Oolong tea, we found ourselves at a forgotten outpost, seemingly on the edge of the world.



The author riding near the Thai-Myanmar border

A small track I'd heard about for years and never had the time to explore had finally been investigated and it led right along a remote corner of the Thai-Myanmar border to an old military base once in the heart of the battle against the Opium trade in the greater Golden Triangle. Times have changed and Ya Ba ("Crazy Drug", as it's known with locals), or methamphetamine, is now the drug of choice. Produced and smuggled by gangs from Muang Yawng, I sipped tea with my new found military friend at his lonely outpost, as we gazed at the town that was in the near distance, yet somehow a world away.

As I got on my dirt bike and rode away, I caught a glimpse of the soldier stroking his sole companion, a mangy but docile canine, and knew exactly where I was: firmly planted on the road less traveled, and loving it.



The author tubing on the Mekong River, Chiang Rai

How to Get There

Specialized travel company, Smiling Albino (www.smilingalbino.com), can arrange all the above dream adventures in a snap, tailored to your specs.

Chiang Rai, Thailand

Thai Airways has three flights daily from Bangkok. www.thaiair.com

Kep, Cambodia

International flights to Phnom Penh leave daily from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City and other regional cities. Kep is then reached by private car or motorbike in about four hours.

Kathmandu, Nepal

Daily flights leave from several Indian cities, Hong Kong, Seoul, Bangkok, Singapore and several Middle Eastern countries.

Tibet

Fights to Lhasa arrive daily from Kathmandu, Chengdu and a handful of other Chinese cities. A high-altitude train also makes the incredible journey and is well worth considering. ☼