

Joe Cummings & Mystical Tattoos

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Take 1

For Traversing the Orient

“A little start up called Lonely Planet (LP) offered me the first edition of its Thailand guidebook,” remembers now legendary travel book writer Joe Cummings, sitting in a Bangkok cafe. “They commissioned me in 1980, I did the research in 1981 and it came out in 1982.”

That book and its subsequent editions became one of LP’s best-selling titles for decades, in no small part to the diligent work, meticulous research and fun tone that Cummings brought to the series.

Almost 30 years later Joe’s for the most part given up formal guidebook writing and is busier than ever. His true love, playing guitar, is a passion he indulges several nights per week in Bangkok clubs, and he’s cranking out writing as frenetically as ever on an incredible range of topics.

He surely couldn’t have guessed he’d be *the* expert on Thailand and greater SE Asian region when he first arrived way back in late seventies. “I came to Thailand in 1977 with the Peace Corps, teaching English for one year,” Joe remembers. “I then went traveling around Thailand, India and Nepal for a couple years and really wanted to spend more time in Nepal.”

With a thirst for knowledge about these regions he returned to his native America in 1979 and enrolled in a Masters Program in Thai Language and SE Asian Art History at the University of California - Berkeley, finding himself engrossed in his studies. “I aced all my classes, I was really into it. I was so thirsty to learn more and fell so in love with SE Asia that as soon as it was finished I came back and have been here more or less ever since.”

When he arrived back in the kingdom of Thailand a couple years later he instantly felt at home. “It was night and day after going to school from 1979-81. This was the longest time I’d been away from Thailand and my Thai was so good! The day I got out of the airport I could read the signs, it was like being reborn in the same life. I knew I was never going to go back.”

With a mastery of the Thai language and LP commissioning him to produce the first edition of their Thailand guidebook, Nepal and other countries quickly faded into the background and Thailand took center stage. “I was always a guide book freak from when I was a kid.” “There was no guidebook to Thailand back then and there hadn’t been an English guidebook since 1928. At that time there were LP books for Sri Lanka and Myanmar but Thailand got twice as many visitors per year as those two countries combined, so Thailand was a natural for a book.”

Lonely Planet advanced him \$9,000US to research and shape the first Thailand guide, which was produced on a typewriter over three weeks and came in at 128 pages. For a point of comparison on how much both the book and Thailand's tourism has grown, the latest edition is a whopping 820 pages.

Joe went on to author and head-up 12 editions of the Thailand book and he's one of the few LP writers to get a cut of royalties which made things quite lucrative for a while he explains. "Up until 2002 I drew royalties then they came to an end in 2002. I went from making six figures a year to four figures a year just like that. By 2006 the money was so lousy it was almost better to do anything else." "I was working my ass off and making peanuts."

Joe's certainly not in writing for the money, but after more than 25 years of heading-up the Thailand publication and LP's sale to BBC in 2007 it was time to move on. By then he'd also authored LP books on Myanmar, Laos, Sri Lanka and more than 30 other titles ranging from Thai architecture to his favorite, *Buddhist Stupas in Asia*, which has a forward by Buddhist studies legend Robert Thurman, something he's rather proud of.

He's also become the go-to-man for Mick Jagger, Oliver Stone and a host of other actors, writers, musicians and high-profile visitors wanting to get on the inside track when they come to the region. "I first met Mick when he was on the *40 Licks Tour* in 2003 and came here for some personal travel." "He was really interested in world history, really well-read and full of substance. I thought he'd be more dissipated, but he was real attentive and doesn't drink much, just a little bit."

Joe spent two days and nights hosting Mick, showing him the sights, sharing history and introducing him to local sounds at pubs and bars around town. During a post-travel moment he got a flattering surprise that sticks with him. "When I came into his suite at the Oriental at the end of one of the days showing him around, I saw on the coffee table in this massive suite, about eight guidebooks on another couple coffee table books with my name on them. He was carrying a library of travel books written by me which was pretty cool."

For a guy that's specialized for the most part in Asia, the favorite guidebook he's authored is a bit surprising. "The Northern Mexico handbook for Moon Travel Guides was my favorite. They gave me complete freedom. It was exactly what I liked – blazing new trails and no one traveled there at the time. By then I had the skills of research from my time in Thailand and it was a lot of fun to put together," he remembers.

With a flair for venturing into unknown territory, continually learning about SE Asia and pushing personal barriers, Joe's latest book, due in March 2011, is perhaps his most ambitious to date.

The Sacred Tattoos of Thailand, or *Sak Yan* as they're known locally, are prevalent all over SE Asia. "They're geometrical designs that many believe have magical power. They've been around since before Buddhism or Hinduism, but incorporate both. *Sak Yan* have become welded to Buddhism and now they're an integrated Animist/Buddhist tradition. Buddhism itself acts as a magic charm."

Sak Yan are handmade using a metal needle attached to a shaft, usually applied by shamen-of-sorts who have devoted themselves to the art and intrinsic rituals that go along with inking them. It was a world Joe had to work hard to break in to.

"The world of *Sak Yan* turned out to be a really deep subject. Really nice people who seemed scary at first, they were very suspicious. It was tough to get people to open up but once they were sure I wasn't trying to make a bizarre magazine story and knew I understood it, it was very easy to get them to talk."

With so many possible topics to write about and having no tattoos himself, it was a friend who drew Joe into this secretive world. "I always really liked tattoos. A friend of mine with tattoos had a lot of really interesting stuff happen to him. He really believed in the power of them. As I got into it, it became more mysterious, esoteric and then REALLY interesting. It was a lot like the *Stupa* book in that everyone sees them, but until you write a book about them you realize there's no textbook out there that can teach you about stupas or tattoos. No one has looked at it as an integrated belief. There's a super interesting sub-culture."

Now that he's learned so much about *Sak Yan* he'll be getting his own soon from a master he met while working on the book, but not until it's officially released, on bookshelves and has proper time to make the experience perfect.

Another Buddhist tradition he's yet to undertake is becoming ordained as a monk. While he regularly wears a Buddhist amulet around his neck, the timing's yet to be right but it's something he plans to do very soon. "I'm hoping to ordain this year. I'm pretty sure I'm going to. I finally have time and I've been wanting to since I was around 30-years-old. When I hit 40 I kept saying I'm really going to do it and they won't take you after 60."

Now in his fifties, Joe looks as cool as he has for the last forty years. He sports longish hair, wears decorative rings and looks more like a band mate of Mick Jagger than an expert in Thai language, history and art. He's busier than ever, working on projects that interest him first and foremost and has a number of exciting, but top-secret projects that will see the light of day before the end of this year. He's firmly set to remain *the* expert in the region for another decade at least.