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HEADLINE: Lonely traveller

SUBHEADLINE: Guidebook author Joe Cummings reveals what it's like to be him and insists the impact of his writing is overstated

BYLINE: Story by

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'Not all who wander are lost,' wrote JRR Tolkien. Should one of the most eminent British writers of the 20th century need any additional backing for his assertion, he would definitely find it in Joe Cummings.

Despite hitting the road some eight consecutive months a year living out of a backpack, moving from one place to another every three or four days, the American-born, Chiang-Mai based travel writer is certainly not lost \_ much to the contrary.

Cummings, 52, has found his true self travelling the world and leading a nomadic life, and his legions of fans would agree with the praise lavished upon him. Outside magazine has written 'No one smooths the path like Joe Cummings, guidebook author supreme,' and Thailand & Indochina Traveller called him 'perhaps the hardest working, best known and most successful guidebook writer in the world'. The Sacramento Bee wrote that 'if Joe Cummings were writing novels instead of travel guidebooks, the world would know his name.'

Cummings has written over 30 original guidebooks for Lonely Planet (LP) and other publishers in Asia and North America. He has bagged numerous awards, among them the Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Gold Award in 1995 for Lonely Planet Thailand.

'His best-selling book Thailand: A Travel Survival Kit has sold more than

one million copies and been translated into a half-dozen languages. Legions of travellers, many of them budgeters touring with backpacks and minimal funds, loyally follow his advice on where to eat, sleep, shop and relax. Entire neighbourhoods of Bangkok have been transformed as a result of his writing," said an article in The Sacramento Bee, setting off the controversial topic of the impact of LP guides on a country's tourism industry.

"I think my influence is overestimated, and I have so much proof of it," Cummings comments without hesitation, sipping a soft drink in the peaceful setting of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand on Phloen Chit Road.

Interviewed during one of his rare moments of free time and visits to Bangkok, Cummings adds: "For example, I have written so many things about the Northeast of Thailand, saying 'It is the best place to visit', but only about two percent of foreign tourists visit that region. On the other hand, I have been writing pretty negatively about Phi Phi Island for the past few years but still, it is such a major destination.

"People tend to choose the destination by themselves but might refer to Lonely Planet for information on hotels and restaurants ... Sometimes, I feel that LP guides are just like fashion accessories!" he says with a laugh.

This is perhaps nowhere more accurate than on the infamous Khao San Road in the Bang Lamphu district of Bangkok where controversy over the influence of LP guidebooks continues full swing. Even novel writer Alex Garland in The Beach published in 1997 and set in Thailand refers to the phenomenon.

"One of these days, I am going to find one of those Lonely Planet writers and I'm going to ask him, what's so [expletive] lonely about the Khao San Road," exclaims one of characters in the

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`Not all who wander are lost,' wrote JRR Tobeach reserve.

``Instead, of course, the characters ended up taking Khao San Road with them. Like the saying goes, `What a Spaniard takes to the Indies, he finds in the Indies.'

``Most backpackers staying in the area are simply using Khao San Road as a sort of decompression chamber between jaunts to more remote parts of Thailand and Southeast Asia.''

Back to the impact of his writing, Cummings comments: ``I think word of mouth, newspapers, Web sites and so on influence people more than Lonely Planet guidebooks. But it is hard to explain; it is a combination of factors. Of course, I accept my responsibility and think carefully about everything I write.

``I always try to look at things from the Thai perspective. Talking to people in local communities, I try to feel and understand what they really want. I identify myself with Thai people,' Cummings says.

He might know the subtleties of the Thai language, the most isolated corners of the country and their most exclusive dishes better than many native Thais. For Cummings truly loves Thailand, where he has been living for nearly 25 years. He is divorced with no children, and is currently in a relationship with a Thai woman. Based in Chiang Mai a few months a year \_ habitually from June to October when he dedicates himself solely to writing \_ he spends the rest of the year travelling throughout the length and breadth of Thailand and Laos, in search of novelty and exploring steadily further more remote parts. He has recently given up writing about North America and Burma in order to expand even further his coverage of the two countries.

``In Thailand, I am still discovering `minor' provinces such as Phayao, Phetchabun, Uttaradit, Phichit and Sa Kaeo which I have not yet explored thoroughly nor did I write about in great detail.'' It's not only geography that he has to discover. ``There is also a variety of white nam prik, called Khao Palon that I have discovered only recently,'' Cummings explains with amusement.

Although he has visited every single province of Thailand, Cummings admits there are still many districts in each of these provinces that he hasn't been to. ``Laos is somehow easier to know but Thailand is quite overwhelming now. I sympathise with those who intend to create new travel books here. It's a big job, and I have done it very gradually,'' he says.

``I feel very much at home in Thailand. For me, the country has just the right combination of convenience and inefficiency. I also generally appreciate the Thai approach to life. I haven't found anywhere else like it,'' Cummings explains.

His early fondness for nonviolent Christian philosophies and Buddhism might have much to do with his appreciation for Thailand. A book he picked up ``out of the blue'' in 1970 from his college bookstore, Towards the Truth by Acharn Buddhadasa Bhikku, provided the initial spark of interest in Asian values and the extra impetus needed to depart from the family cocoon.

Born in 1952 in New Orleans to a military father working for the Pentagon and a mother also serving in the US forces, Cummings would indeed wander radically from the path his parents took. ``It is an irony that I was protesting for peace when my father was working in the Pentagon,'' Cummings comments, smiling.

Immersed in anti-war feelings in the Indochina war era, Cummings went to Thailand in early 1977 as a Peace Corps volunteer. His first assignment was to teach English at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology in Bang Mot, southwest of Bangkok.

``I arrived here just after the October 1976 massacre ... It was a very tense period with very right-wing feelings and the military regime back in power. It was just the opposite of what I had expected to find; in my

fantasy, a very peaceful Buddhist country. But I grew to it and soon loved Thailand," he recalls.

Cummings later went back to the US to pursue a master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies, with a minor in tourism, at the University of California, Berkley. If his parents failed to pass on tradition of military service to their son, they definitely succeeded in transmitting to him their passion for travel.

Living on the move, Cummings' parents first met and got married in Germany before going back to the States. Together with Cumming's younger sister, the family also lived in Orleans, France for about 10 years.

"I can't remember all the places I have lived in. Travelling has always been natural for me," he says, adding that the image that often comes to mind when thinking about his parents is of a car littered with travel books, his mother absorbed in reading and his father driving.

Irresistibly attracted to Southeast Asia, Cummings approached Lonely Planet in 1980, which was then a tiny company based in Melbourne and founded a few years earlier by Tony and Maureen Wheeler. Cummings had already written a couple of articles on tourism in the region that were published in the US, and he had decided there was a market for a guidebook on Thailand.

"I sent [Lonely Planet] some figures about how tourism was increasing rapidly in Thailand. They wrote me back immediately asking for writing samples. That was the starting point," Cummings recalls.

In 1981, fresh from university, Cummings started working on the first edition of Lonely Planet Thailand that was to be published in February 1982.

"I just hit the road and started travelling by bus, train and all means of transportation. I would mostly get information from local people, on what to see, where to go." Cummings already had some basic knowledge of the Thai language when he arrived.

"Everything was so different back then, with very few hotels, especially in small towns. I was often spending the night in monasteries or in a sala on a sarong spread on the floor. I had so much fun. I remember my first trip to

Koh Samui, then astoundingly beautiful. I was in awe of the beauty of the places, of the Khmer ruins in the Northeast of the country as well,' Cummings remembers.

``I spent about two months on the road and six weeks or so writing. Now, it would be impossible. Thailand has exploded! I can barely keep up with it myself.''

Now, twenty-odd years later, LP Thailand is in its 10th edition. From the 120 pages of the first edition, the travel guide has ballooned to nearly 1,000 pages, becoming one of the largest in the LP collection. The American Geographical Society has called the book ``One of those rare travel guides written with such care and insight it deserves listing as literature.''

Lonely Planet has turned into an empire, with offices in Oakland, California, London and Paris in addition to Melbourne, with over 54 million books printed over the past 30 years. In October 2003, the publisher celebrated its 30th anniversary.

The list of guidebooks authored by Joe Cummings on Thailand and the region is ever expanding; including Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Northern Thailand, Thailand's Islands and Beaches, South-East Asia on a Shoestring and Laos and Burma guidebooks. Cummings has also authored handy phrasebooks on the Lao and Thai languages, not to mention World Food: Thailand and the sumptuous hardcover The Shape of Perfection: Buddhist Stupas in Asia, to name but a few works.

Meanwhile, Cummings has also had countless improbable encounters including meeting Rolling Stone-turned-royalty Sir Mick Jagger on his visit to the Kingdom last year for his concert performance (which was cancelled at the last minute).

On his Web site <http://joecummings.com>, Cummings gives a very humorous recollection of his encounter with the icon of rock: ``When the [Rolling Stones tour organisers] invited me to take Mick out on Bangkok's Chao Phraya for a river and canal tour, I was surprised and, of course, nervous.

``... Mick was, to sum up my overall impression, eternally hip and surprisingly introspective. We talked one-on-one for two hours ... and he

was charming, witty and easy. He gave me some brotherly advice on life, fame and love.'

Despite his brushes with fame, as time passes Cummings seems to have remained himself: a tireless traveller, friendly and uncomplicated. He increasingly resembles his own books, turning into a mine of information, engaging and overflowing with stories to tell.

``Some places are getting better, some places are getting worse, it's always been the same. The development of infrastructures has made it easier to travel, while inappropriate development has allowed the degradation of the environment \_ illegal encroachment on national parks for example,' he says.

``But one still needs to recognise that many places in Thailand have been very well protected, such as Tarutao or the Similan islands. This is very encouraging. One can hardly find places equally well-protected elsewhere in the world.''