

Meet Conor Woodman

The Man Behind *Scam City*



Conor Woodman

For those of you who have never seen the Travel and Escape television show *Scam City* (also seen on the National Geographic channel), the series is designed to expose scams, frauds and cons perpetrated on visitors to popular tourist destinations. It's riveting television. Woodman's show does its best to shed some light on the darker side and sometimes downright evil underbelly of tourist traps, though, to be fair, it should be mentioned that he often actively seeks out scammers and goes undercover as bait. He is also an equal opportunity scam-buster, as he not only targets some of the most obvious suspects destination-wise, where the poverty is staggering and crime is a way of life, but also takes aim at some of the world's most sophisticated cities, like New York, Paris and Rome. A seasoned world traveler who received his start in the biz as an investigative reporter/exposé journalist, Woodman has seen it all. So let's sit down with the man to see what makes him tick.

LR: Where are you from?

CW: I was born in Ireland but home is

London.

LR: What is your journalistic background?

CW: I've worked in TV now for over ten years but my most 'journalistic' piece of work was my second book, "Unfair Trade," which is a reportage style look at how big business exploits workers around the world.

LR: Why did you think there was a need for this type of show?

CW: I don't think anyone has ever really penetrated the world of street criminals to see what makes them tick before. I wanted to show viewers who the people were that made a living from ripping them off.

LR: Had you been scammed personally in your travels before the show?

CW: Once or twice. I was in Thailand as a student and got taken in by the elaborate 'gem scam' where you are initially told the temple you're on your way to see is 'closed' and then get taken on a wild goose chase that ends up in a gem store. Funnily enough it's still happening today and we covered it in the Bangkok episode of *Scam City*.

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Globetrotting Watchdog



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Let's continue with our interview of *Scam City's* Conor Woodman...

LR: Do you think the average tourist would fall prey to some of these scams?

CW: Average tourist, no. Most people pass their holidays happily avoiding getting ripped off. But there is a significant minority who don't, and you never know when that will be you.

LR: Have you ever been in trouble with the local tourism boards for painting an unduly negative portrait of their destination?

CW: Yes. A couple of times. A couple of cities we featured reacted in a really disappointing way to the show. I think we're very balanced and the idea is that we help people to travel more safely, but a couple of the cities we've featured haven't seen it the same way.

LR: Would you want this show to stop people from traveling?

CW: No. That's missing the point. I want people to travel, but I want to arm them with the knowledge they need to travel safely.

LR: What would you say has been the most creative scam you've encountered?

CW: I often admire the physical skill of a good pickpocket. But the most lucrative scam we've featured has to be the money counterfeiters in Argentina. Those guys are literally making money!

LR: It's often said that tourists tend to leave their common sense at home; would you say that this is why most visitors become victims of scams?

CW: Yes. They take a holiday and their common sense does too.

LR: Of all the places you have been, which would you rate as the most dangerous, and which as the safest?

CW: Bogota is still very dangerous; you must be on alert. And I'd say New York is probably the safest we've covered so far.

LR: If you could tell your viewers to do only one thing to keep them safer or less of a target for scams, what would it be?

CW: Visit www.travelbugged.co.uk and share your experiences. The more info we share with each other, the better prepared we can all be when we travel. ■

Watch *Scam City* here: www.travelandscape.ca/shows/scam-city

—SUSAN CAMPBELL