



**"I'M PROBABLY GENETICALLY STILL
95 PERCENT A STONER MUSICIAN,
EVEN THOUGH MY DAY LOOKS
VERY DIFFERENT."**

ROADS AND KINGDOMS

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If you're looking for Nathan Thornburgh, best not search for him in conventional places. You may track him down at a fishing village in Cape Town, South Africa, shadowing abalone poachers. He might be celebrating on the Copacabana Beach, along with tens of thousands of revelers during the Rio World Cup. He could be at a street corner restaurant in Nanjing sharing dumplings with a People's Liberation Army paratrooper. Or maybe he's tucked away in a brick-lined high-rise in Brooklyn, masterminding the online travel and culture magazine, *Roads and Kingdoms*. If you brave the underbrush of the road less traveled, you might just track him down.

At 19, Thornburgh never dreamed journalism was to be his vocation. But the idea embedded itself in the back of his mind when he befriended a few reporters at an Irish pub called Rosie O'Grady's in Moscow. "That was the first journalism exposure I had, which was: these guys are fun to drink with," he recalls. That journalist inclination lay dormant while he was a student at Stanford University, and for a few years following that, while he was a mediocre horn player. Then, after realizing his musical limitations, he switched to writing about the topic for Seattle's *The Stranger*. "Within a week, I had made more money and was clearly just better at writing than at actually playing music," he smiles.

When the 2000 election came, Thornburgh started sneaking political jabs into his pieces. He craved substance that superficial music reviews couldn't offer him. The answer sailed into Lake Union and docked at the Northlake Shipyard one afternoon in the form of a Russian crab boat. Curiosity piqued, Thornburgh paddled over on a kayak to introduce himself. Russian was one of

the four languages he knew, so he soon struck up a conversation with the Kamchatkan fishermen. "We were hanging off the deck of this boat—shirtless, smoking cigarettes, spitting into the lake," he recollects. "And that started a whole summer of just hanging out with these guys." This, in turn, became fuel for an article.

Thornburgh pitched the piece to *Time* magazine, and although they were intrigued, it didn't fit their global vision. It did, however, put him on their radar. Four years later, Thornburgh received his first byline with the magazine. From there, he was hired as an editor and foreign correspondent—work that gave him the chance of "traveling for understanding." He spent nearly a decade in the position, but when *Time* started shutting down bureaus, Thornburgh's dream job as Moscow bureau chief died with them. He also noticed a widening fork between the magazine's priorities and his own. "They had simply decided that readers didn't care about the world," he says. "And I *strongly* disagreed with that understanding of their audience."

Around the same time, Thornburgh met Matt Goulding, food editor of *Men's Health* and co-author of the bestselling series *Eat This, Not That!* Thornburgh hadn't previously been interested in food writing, but Goulding's animated description of his latest piece, "There Are No Nachos in Mexico," caught his ear. "Matt has a way of talking about food that somehow gets beyond the gloss," he says.

In addition to bonding over a kindred desire for exploration, both journalists were searching for an exit strategy from corporate media. They sketched out a company that combined their interests and recruited Douglas Hughmanick as



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creative director and designer. The final result was *Roads and Kingdoms*—an independent journal that seeks to entwine foreign correspondence with food and travel through long-form journalism articles, books, and an upcoming podcast to be launched in March. “We see the ability to move into a lot of different media,” Thornburgh says. “But we do it slowly. In no sense are we burning the whole house down just to light the stove.”

They make an unlikely team—Thornburgh in New York, Goulding in Barcelona, and Hughmanick in San Jose. But the distance doesn’t prevent them from rallying behind a shared vision: using food and travel not as topics to be glorified in and of themselves, but as vehicles to nurture curiosity, awareness, wonder, and finally celebration of culture. Instead of travel for travel’s sake, they encourage their readership to “find a story, learn something about the world, get exposed to people.”

One example of the quality content generated through teamwork and collaboration is *Road and Kingdom*’s first book-publishing endeavor, a series which focuses on food cultures around the world. The first book, *Rice, Noodle, Fish: Deep Travels Through Japan’s Food Culture*, and the second, *Grape, Olive, Pig: Deep Travels Through Spain’s Food Culture*, have been written by Goulding, designed by Hughmanick, and edited by Thornburgh.

“I’ve got this man crush on the way Matt writes,” Thornburgh admits. “Matt is a complete perfectionist. He tortures every sentence and tests every word.” A single sentence from *Rice, Noodle, Fish* shows this statement to be no exaggeration: “Swollen-bellied salmon, dark disks of abalone, vast armies of exotic crustaceans, conger eels so shiny and new they looked to be napping in their Styrofoam boxes.” Quieter sentences reflect this same diligence: “Inside the market, I saw the entire ocean on display.”

Besides editing, Thornburgh also acted as catalyst for the series’ journey to publication. He supported Goulding before the books took physical form and encouraged him to reach out to mutual

acquaintance, chef, and HarperCollins author Anthony Bourdain. Not only did Bourdain agree to arrange a meeting with HarperCollins’ top editors, but he also advocated strongly on the series’ behalf. “He gives us hope that you can really aggressively—sometimes abrasively—stick to your own aesthetics and vision and not be doomed to irrelevance.” Of Bourdain, Thornburgh says, “people will gravitate toward a stronger sense of identity.”

That nonconformity permeates deep into the soul of *Roads and Kingdoms*. This is a company that refuses to build its name with cheap popularity ploys, to generate quick web content with click bait titles and listicles, or even to sponsor ads. “At the end of the day, we’d much rather be doing something additive and interesting and put some new work into the world than trying to chase a pretty busted and grimy business,” Thornburgh explains.

One way or another, the guys associated with *Roads and Kingdoms* have been mutineers against society’s expectations from a young age. Hughmanick was a defiant teen wielding a spray can. Goulding grew up as a misfit and a skate rat. Bourdain regularly toted nunchakus and a samurai sword around his college campus. And Thornburgh explored with psychedelics throughout his university years. That rebellious spark brought them together and is now channeled into their work. “I’m probably genetically still 95 percent a stoner musician, even though my day looks very different,” Thornburgh says, a statement supported by a voice tinged with cigarettes and whiskey.

Thornburgh claims journalists are people who are interested in stories. “They like to move around and drink heavily. You have to be honest, you have to be curious as hell, and you have to be able to meet a deadline,” he says. But should we allow this mindset to be monopolized by reporters alone? Next time you read one of their articles, take part in the journey. Don’t skim over the lines, but see each carefully chosen word as it was intended. Enter through the eyes of the writer and step into their reality—even if for only 15 minutes. **C**