

AARON COHEN

Conversations with Aaron Cohen are often free-wheeling Wagnerian operas that wander into unfathomable realms of horror. On the patio of the café, where we sit talking in Orange County, California, eavesdropping patrons suspend their forks in midair and turn their heads, while the waitress skittishly asks if we want more coffee.

"Night frightening' is when you go out posing as a sex tourist, going from one brothel to the next with one taxi driver to the next, doing the drill over and over again," Cohen says. "How long you been driving the cab? Oh, five years? You must know the city really well. I love the ladies,' or, 'I love the boys,' whatever you're looking for."

This isn't normal coffeehouse talk, but then again, Cohen's life as a "slave hunter" is far from normal. "I was looking for this young girl and I went to a bunch of places, and after a few nights of trying, I found her and ended up in bad circumstances and a gun fight ensued." **COHEN**

TRAVELS AROUND THE WORLD

LIKE A ONE-MAN ARMY, FIGHTING

SWEATSHOPS, SEX SLAVERY, AND

HUMAN EXPLOITATION BY LIBER-

ATING ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

For many, slavery is a distant thought, a bygone era of shackles, slave ships, and plantations relegated to middle chapters of history books. In today's world, however, slavery is much more subtle, and flourishes as illegal, underground syndicates around the world, including, of course, the United States. In Thailand, children are sold to brothels. In Mexico, where an estimated 16,000 children work in the sex trade, boys are forced to "act" in porn films. In Orange County, women are forced to work in nail salons or labor as domestic help, or worse, sell their bodies in massage parlors. Vietnamese women are trafficked to work in garment factories in Taiwan, where they labor for infrequent paychecks that eventually stop coming.

Modern slavery doesn't yell, it whispers. Both slave and trafficker are usually the victims of endemic poverty, and those who are in control often become so out of necessity. Cohen recognizes the complicated moral order in the sex-slave industry. "When we go and do slave retrievals, I have to have nondiscrimination in my mind," he says. "When I look at a pimp or a madam, I don't see them as the bad guy, I see them as an extension of myself. And they're somebody that I need to have compassion for because they are somebody who is suffering."

Cohen has performed slave retrievals in locales as widespread and varied as Haiti, Colombia, Sudan, and Myanmar. He is often contracted by the U.S. State Department to conduct covert operations in

these politically volatile regions, going deep undercover in the party scene as a sex tourist trolling for action. Once Cohen has the necessary evidence, he either notifies the authorities or, if he's able, helps the victims escape. In the nineties, he was a close friend of Jane's Addiction frontman Perry Farrell, who looked to Cohen for spiritual advice and creative inspiration. Eventually, Cohen was pulled into the rock-star life, and the partying led to drug addiction and the darker side of humanity.

"That experience really empowered me," says the now-clean Cohen. "When I go into these environments and I see heroin, and the damage the drug culture is doing to these young boys, [I'm able] to understand that culture. I believe there's a reason for everything. I flipped my drug addiction over, and the blessing of it is that I've used my knowledge to traverse environments that a normal person who hasn't experienced [drug addiction] would just be in complete horror of."

Cohen often speaks of the interconnectedness of all human life, and he lives by this mantra by participating in the lives of those he liberates. But he knows that lasting change only comes with perseverance.

"I tell people to adopt a victim, and stay in their life. Forgive them for the mistakes they made and just be there for them as they go through this transition to freedom.

"I have this theory that if you save one person, you are literally saving the whole world." ☒



Photography: Aaron Farley for aaron@aaronly.com.