



THAILAND BY DESIGN

TEXTILE DESIGNER **JOHN ROBshaw** REVISITS THE COUNTRY THAT HAS INSPIRED HIM
WITH ITS COLORS, PATTERNS, AND REVERENCE FOR ALL THINGS BEAUTIFUL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS WISE



The author captures the local flora in his sketchbook. Opposite: The lush and mysterious shores of Phang Nga Bay



John Bobshaw takes a shopping break with a fresh mango shake.

Thailand

and I go way back—20 years, in fact. I was a recent art-school graduate trekking across India in search of block-printing workshops, and frankly, I was worn out. I flew to Bangkok for a break, showed up at an art opening for Julian Schnabel, and somehow emerged from that party with a job working for a Thai who was developing what can only be summarized as the Barneys of Bangkok.

I stayed, and ultimately fell for that seductive city. It inspired me then, and continues to, even when I'm in my Manhattan showroom. It informs my sense of color, pattern, and texture. But more than that, its embrace of beauty informs my life. No matter where I am in the world, I keep my watch set to Bangkok time.

And now I'm back: for two days in the markets, museums, and restaurants in Bangkok's old city, and two more out at one of the most beautiful beaches on Earth. I arrive with my sketching notebook, my iPhone for quick snaps, extra bags for shopping finds, and the quickening sense of returning to someone—or in this case some place—you love.

SEDUCTIVE SIAM

Hello, Bangkok. I'm always glad to see the city hang onto its steamy balance of the old Siam and the new, go-go Asia. Turn-of-the-century mansions obscured by groves of bamboo sit next to mirrored skyscrapers. Thai temples pose elegantly like steps up to the heavens, and monks wait patiently for alms in the early morning hours. Thailand emerges to the senses like a lotus from muddy water—an explosion of neon pink blossoms—to feed you, entertain you, and of course sell you a few yards of silk.

The morning I arrive, jet-lagged and expecting my wits to follow in a day or two, I stumble into the bright white Siam hotel, perched regally on the banks of the Chao Phraya River (Bangkok's ancient lifeline, pouring southward into the Gulf of Siam). Here in the old part of the city—home to some of Bangkok's best museums and markets—this new hotel echoes the antique patina of the neighborhood in luxurious style. In the lush atrium, I move past rows of two-story-high palms and catch the sounds of Thai crooners from the 1940s wafting from the lobby's hidden speakers. My personal butler, Aum, politely urges me forward to my riverside suite, where I'm surrounded by modern design with touches from the hotel owner's family: a writing desk, ceramics, and spirit houses—ornate, miniature dwellings that provide shelter for the place's protective spirits. My balcony overlooks the waters of the Chao Phraya, and the white noise of river traffic burbles below.

CHASING FLAVORS

One of my greatest pleasures in Bangkok is searching for food (that, and collecting textiles), and I start close to home with breakfast at my hotel's Chon Thai Restaurant, a waterfront cluster of three century-old teakwood houses. As barges bump slowly downriver and long-tail boats—narrow, classically Southeast Asian vessels with prows that rise from the water as though they're sniffing the air—sputter upriver, I order congee rice, boiled until it forms a thick porridge, mixed with minced pork, cilantro, and ginger and then tossed with reckless abandon in chili and vinegar. I toss back strong black coffee. It's a perfect marriage, and welcomes me back to the tastes I love so much.

Life here revolves around food. A typical Thai greeting is not "How are you?" It's "Have you eaten yet?" And why not be obsessed with this cuisine? It's full of flavor, inexpensive, and addictive. I discover creamy crab curry and fish cakes—light, heavenly, and served with a kick of homemade chili sauce—at the delightfully drab Krus Aporn in the old city (and reaffirm my Thai friends' counsel that the stronger the fluorescent lights, the better the food). At Jae Fai Street Food, chef Jae is reputed to have the best seafood connection in the city (which is mumbled in my ear by a local like a state secret). What I know is that she masters three flaming woks over blistering coals, whipping her spatulas in and out of the oil like a muay Thai master. Jae cooks for one table at a time, and it's worth every minute of waiting. My *hai jiew* poe, a fried omelet with jumbo crabmeat, emerges from her wok as delicately folded as a gift.



City visions (clockwise from top, left): Flower Market lotus buds; a serene walkway at The Siam hotel; textiles for sale from a fabric shop in the Weekend Market; the author's sketches of Bangkok architecture; a vendor at her pretty printed wares at the Weekend Market; a crab omelette from Jae Fai Street Food

Bangkok botany: The Siam hotel's palm-filled atrium (below); Flower Market blooms (inset). Opposite: Sketching on Phang Nga Bay



day after day, drawing the delicate elongated domes of the stupas in ink. It's good to see them again, unchanged, forever pointing to heaven.

Around another bend: Bangkok's glorious Flower Market. Shipments of flowers from the outer provinces arrive by nightfall; sacks full of jasmine and marigold blossoms spill out lazily on tables and pavement. I watch the colors

bloom, and suddenly those lotus bouquets we drift by become new print ideas. I spy orchids in every color and dream of odd and exotic combinations—deep violet and cinnabar pink, a stunning white-green, the earthy carmines of alizarin and madder red.

I think of the brightly colored bracelets and necklaces strung from fresh flowers at the market. Every time I visit, I find the ladies who sit at their tables and patiently piece together lotus blossoms as if they will last forever, while knowing that they will fade the next day. I find this reverence for the fleeting quality of beauty everywhere in this country. It's truly a Thai approach to life.

RIVER INSPIRATIONS

A city that blooms out from its mother river, Bangkok reveals its heart and soul to those who take to the water. So how could I say no to an evening cruise on The Siam hotel's tricked-out teak rice barge? Ever the perfect butler, Aum climbs aboard with me, toting a cocktail, and our vessel heads downstream.

What visions: We drift past the many-spired complex of the Grand Palace, the official residence of the kings of Siam (and, later, Thailand) since 1782, which offers a heady mix of Saint Peter's Basilica, a Baroque painting, and a Vegas casino. Nearby stands the massive temple Wat Arun, its tower decorated with demons and monkeys and encrusted with porcelain mosaic tiles that catch the low light of sunset and set it dancing. I love the stupas, these tall, elegant temples throughout Thailand (more than 30,000 of them) that hold Buddhist relics. No two are alike. Once, convalescing from a broken leg in Bangkok (that's another story), I sat

ESCAPE TO THE BEACH

After a few days in old Bangkok, I always pull myself away to head down to the beach. I hop a plane for a one-hour jump south to the famed resort town of Phuket. There, a boat spirits me across the water to the island of Yao Noi, famed for its pristine beaches and breathtaking views of the limestone pinnacles jutting mysteriously from the waters of Phang Nga Bay. I wander the wild botanical grounds of the Six Senses Yao Noi resort, taking in the scents and colors of water lily, lotus, Chinese rose, rubiaceae, and jasmine. It's so lush I can barely find my villa among all the palms.

My time on Yao Noi toggles between happy indolence at the edge of the infinity pool and exploration. The resort wrangles me a motorcycle; I putter down a pier to watch Thai kids fish while those quiet limestone sentinels change colors with the rising and

ROBSHAW'S GUIDE TO BANGKOK'S WEEKEND MARKET

While the Flower Market never fails to inspire me, the Weekend Market is shopping heaven: covered stalls where you will find old textiles, food, Hill tribe jewelry, and the list goes on. Experts here know that you buy it when you find it; you may never see the same stall again. That said, I never go in without my **Nancy Chandler Map of Bangkok** (nancychandler.net), which both orients and inspires with insider tips. And the treasures await. There's **Rob**, with

its Isaan textiles from the northeast corner of the country, hand-woven patched bags, and sarongs perfect for the beach. **Wassana** (named after the owner) overflows with Burmese, Laotian, and Hill tribe textiles by the suitcase. This visit, I stumbe upon Afghan beaded pieces (probably originally from jackets) in fantastic earth colors that will make perfect coasters. Not everything is old here: I am a fan of the clearly modern jewelry of

Thailand's **Karen Silver Jewelers** and buy some new pieces from a shop named, simply, **Jay**. Bags filled, it's time for a drink at **Viva**, a Thai designer/artist hangout. Singh, the national beer, goes down easy after this kind of shopping conquest.



Thai textiles inspire Robshaw's own line of textiles and homewear, available at jshrobshaw.com.

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lowering sun. I happen upon a group of teens playing *takru*, a Thai game that combines volleyball and soccer. Using their feet, knees, chests, and heads, the players set up and spike a small rattan ball over a volleyball net slung between two rubber trees.

Color and design are everywhere, always. On another pier, I stop to watch a group of ladies sitting on stools and creating batiks. They barely notice my presence, much less my admiration of their steady hands as they draw and dye patterns of neon coral formations and trippy schools of fish. At another cove, boatbuilders tend to their vessels. Painted in lively greens and blues, the boats have bold, old Thai script racing along their sides in undulating, elegant arches. I stop on the roads to take snapshots of tropical bark colors for future print collections. Thailand shows me how these subtle greens and tans look perfect together.

As the sun rises on my second morning, I hire a long-tail boat to visit Krabi, a town on the mainland with spectacular beaches, sheer limestone cliffs, and mysterious mangrove swamps. Renting a kayak gets me out among the mangroves, their roots protruding from the water like the legs of giant spiders. I slow to sketch their forms. The lagoons here are pure emerald, and the walls of plants and palms pass by in too many shades of green to count. I paddle close to a cliff's face. I begin to draw again, and know that I could draw these over and over, a million times for years, finding something new each time like the Chinese landscape painters. That's not a bad life, I think. Returning again and again to this cliff, to note its delicate changes in color and light. Why leave this water, this bay, this paradise?

But leave it I must. I bid farewell to Six Senses and board a boat for Bangkok, where I will dash to my favorite Weekend Market for a bit of shopping before flying away to rejoin the world. On the ride to the mainland, I picture the saffron robes of a monk I saw while wandering a side street in the old city, the watercolor-like ceramic statues along the waterfront, the whirling poetry of Thai lettering.

My mind fills with a visit I made a few days ago to the National Museum, to renew my love of its gracefully aging Thai trade textiles. I was wandering without purpose, as I often do, and then there she was: a small girl, standing still and dropping white frangipani blossoms into a pool filled with blazing golden koi. She wore a flowered dress. I inhaled the still beauty of the vision, and then she skipped away, disappearing through a door. Thailand is like this. It's a moment, a gesture. And if you are watching, it can mean the world. ■

John Robshaw is a textile designer based in New York City. This is his first piece for Coastal Living.



WHERE TO STAY

The Siam - An Urban Luxury Resort is located on three acres of prime riverfront in the heart of Bangkok's historic district and features 28 suites and 7 private pool villas. Rates start at \$525. 662/206-6999 or thesiamhotel.com

Six Senses Yao Noi has 55 villas—all with private infinity pools and glorious views—and sits on an island beyond Phuket in Phang Nga Bay. Rates start at \$600. 855/895-6693 or sixsenses.com




Color and design



Beach Inspirations (clockwise from far left): Lunch at Six Senses Yao Noi; a boat journey on Phang Nga Bay; Robshaw's sketchbook; villa views at Six Senses; lush foliage and bathing spaces; an island jaunt in search of local color; the bay's spectacular limestone pinnacles from the Six Senses Infinity pool



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 **BONUS VIEWS** See more stunning photos from Robshaw's adventures in Thailand at cbsafeliving.com/robshaw