

Blending In: *Thailand's Luxury Hotel Designs*

A first-hand look at two luxury Thai resorts designed to complement their very different surroundings

Written By: Joseph Reaney

The Siam: The Decadent City Retreat

Bangkok is saturated with five-star hotels. The competition is so fierce that luxury chains like JW Marriot have been forced to lower room prices to as little as \$160 a night. Yet last year, within this overcrowded marketplace, a brand new hotel opened; one that claimed to offer a more decadent experience than any other. An irresistibly original city resort offering premium comfort, luxury and privacy at a premium rate.

Celebrating history

The Siam couldn't be more different to its Bangkok luxury hotel rivals. Rather than being clustered with the others near the center, The Siam is located in the quiet, historic Dusit district; home to time-honored temples, palaces and museums. While the other five-star options rely on tuk-tuks to ferry guests around, The Siam offers its own private shuttle boat service from its own private pier. And while high-end usually means high-rise, The Siam's 39 spacious suites and villas are liberally spread across three riverside acres.

Yet this is just the start of the resort's unique approach to architecture, design and décor; a concept that comes from owner and developer KrissSukosol Clapp. "I wanted to create something different," he says. "Somewhere designed for the ultra-luxury traveler, that also felt distinctly – genuinely – Thai.... that fit in well with this historic area. The Siam is a resort with character that celebrates our heritage and culture."

Telling stories

Working with the renowned architect Bill Bensley, Kriss set about planning a country-style retreat for the discerning traveler. They soon came up with a distinctive design aesthetic that harked back to the lavish period of King Rama V, while adding new Art Deco flourishes. Bensley recalls how they wanted to "create a resort that may have been built in the 1930s, but with all the creature comforts of today." They decided on a subdued color scheme of blacks, whites and creams, combined with natural textures such as wood, leather and stone, as "this allowed us to quietly stack layers of interest, with antiques telling the story."

The antiques Bill refers to can be found throughout the hotel. Using treasures taken from Kriss' personal collection, each area of the hotel was given its own art concept; from the Muay Thai boxing memorabilia in the gym to the ancient Tang Dynasty figurines in the library. And each room uses antiquities to tell its own distinct story, whether about the nation's beauty queens or its military. These cultural insights also extend beyond ornaments and objets d'art, incorporating historic room features like windows and doors.

Redefining luxury

Perhaps the greatest examples of the resort's commitment to preserving and promoting Thai history are their Jim Thompson buildings. In the early 1900s, the influential American designer and silk merchant created a select few houses that combined traditional Thai and modern Western techniques. Today, you can find six of these grouped into one of Bangkok's most visited tourist attractions, but two more can be found at The Siam. One is now a traditional Thai restaurant, and the other a signature holiday property.

The beautiful Connie's Cottage – named for Jim Thompson's friend Connie Mangskau – is a century-old Thai teakwood house which originally stood in the ancient capital Ayutthaya. Now it is an ultra-luxurious abode offering a huge four-poster bed, en-suite bathroom, outdoor balcony and impressive private pool.

Yet whichever room you stay in, you can be certain of experiencing a genuine slice of Thai life in a world of utter decadence, with all the space, amenities and services guests demand from an ultra-luxury hotel.

The Siam already stands alone as Bangkok's only true city resort, but its this wholehearted commitment to beautiful architecture and design, with a sprinkle of cultural insight, that makes it truly one-of-a-kind.

The Siam (www.thesiamhotel.com) opened in June 2012 and is home to 39 individually-designed and themed private rooms. The resort's suites start from 16,300 THB (\$556 USD) per night, while villas begin at 31,000 THB (\$1,057). One night in Connie's Cottage starts from 46,500 THB (\$1,586 USD).



Paresa: The Luxury Coastal Resort

The sun skirts the ocean’s edge. The lingering light dances upon the water’s surface, from infinite sea to infinity pool, until it sinks, exhausted, beyond the crystal horizon. Slowly but surely, the untamed forest around darkens, and the air fills with the song of a million cicadas. The long, hot day is finally at an end.

As I lie on the lounge at the water’s edge, a chilled cocktail in hand, I witness more lights appear on the surface of the pool – stars, emerging – and I recline further to enjoy the full majesty of Phuket’s nature.

Maintaining traditions

It’s an experience Paresa is proud to offer. It may be just one of many hotels lining the western shore of Thailand’s famous peninsula, but this isn’t your regular copy-and-paste resort, found on beaches around the world, perhaps with a few token nods to Thai culture in the form of Buddha statues or silk uniforms. This is a resort designed to celebrate the distinctive culture and spectacular nature of its Thai peninsula.

“When they first discovered this plot of land, the Bangkok owners discussed building a retirement home here,” reveals Scot Toon, General Manager of Paresa Resort. “But they soon realized they’d need staff to care for it while they weren’t there. So they thought again, and decided to create a small, luxury resort.”

From the beginning, it was decided the hotel should incorporate the best of Phuket. They commissioned local firm UKD Architects, “as they had experience with villas and houses,” says Toon, “and we wanted a residential feel to Paresa”, and decided on a concept that fit in with its surroundings. “That meant using traditional Southern Thai architecture and design styles, such as earth-colored brickwork and flat green slate roofs, to blend in with nature. Unlike other local resorts, we avoided northern-style pitched roofs.”

Highlighting nature

Scot also reveals how they ensured the resort complemented the natural environment. “It’s understated, organic architecture. The residences

were built on the side of the cliff, around the natural landscape, and use timber furnishings and teak floors. As few trees as possible were cut down during construction – we even built our restaurant Recipe by Ryan around a banyan tree! – plus we planted extra native plants.”

“And since we opened,” he proudly adds, “not one single branch has been cut down.”

In return, Paresa has made the most of its spectacular surroundings. Rather than hanging works of art of plastered walls, almost every interior incorporates floor-to-ceiling windows with stunning panoramas of the Andaman Sea. Rather than filling the rooms with trinkets, Paresa suggests simply enjoying this view.

Delivering indulgence

Yet despite this concerted effort to blend in, Paresa still manages to stand out – as one of the peninsula’s most luxurious hotel options. There are 49 spacious suites and villas here, offering between 140 and 600 square meters, and each with a balcony boasting a private infinity pool looking across the water (though the policy of not pruning the flora means the ocean view in each residence does vary). The hotel is home to three restaurants, serving everything from traditional Thai delicacies to sumptuous Italian dishes, and also offers extensive room service and even in-room barbeques, complete with personal chef and waiter.

There are also extensive fitness and spa facilities, from ocean-facing treadmills to divine Thai massages, plus a library, a cooking school and private transport down to the resort’s own stretch of pristine beach.

Yet as I lie back by the large infinity pool, with the night creeping further in, it’s clear that the real charm of Paresa isn’t its free WiFi, its butler service or its wedding facilities. It’s the fact that the hotel has been carefully constructed to make the most of its biggest attraction. The unique landscape of Thailand itself.

The Paresa (www.paresaresorts.com) opened in 2010 and is home to 49 individual residences. Suites start from 14,987 THB (\$511 USD) per night, while villas start from 27,220 THB (\$928). There are also four Grand Villas, able to accommodate 12 adults – please contact Paresa for rates and reservations.

