



## Preface

by Alex Kerr,  
author of 'Lost Japan' and 'Bangkok Found'

This is the book I wish I'd had when I first came to Thailand. A hundred things which had intrigued me for decades became clear on reading it. Such as where the statue of the beckoning lady came from, or why the alphabet always appears with pictures. Another hundred things, to my embarrassment, I had hardly even noticed, but these turned out to be among the most interesting. Such as the little pink napkins set out on café tables, or the organisation of motorcycle boys at the mouths of *soi*.

Thailand seems an informal, free-wheeling place, even at times chaotic. But you do come to realise that there's an internal logic and symbolism invisibly ordering everything. One of my Ten Laws of Thai life is: "There is always a Thai way to do it." Somewhere, inside an item of molded plastic, or submerged in the glossy pages of a *hi-so* magazine, the inner structure is there to be found.

This book begins to get at that inner structure, at deeply ingrained attitudes towards life. In the popular culture, these are embellished with fantasy, redesigned for convenience, and finished off with a feeling of *sanuk*. Thus Hindu goddesses end up as beauty queens, court etiquette asserts itself at the whisky serving table, boat prows transform into the painted bonnets of trucks, and the sparkle of temple walls, in the form of electric light bulbs, drapes itself over trees and avenues.

I feel like a godfather to this book. I was there when many of the photos were taken, edited the text, and saw the book grow and transform. Philip and John, in their separate ways, both began collecting photographs and ideas years before the idea of the book arose. In his photos, John has a knack of capturing Thai things as we encounter them, on the street. With Philip, what struck me was his incredible curiosity and persistence. We would be speeding along a highway and he would suddenly insist that the car stop – so that he could investigate and photograph a roadside shack where they made trash bins out of used tyres.

Philip would grill an expert for hours about what society women's hairdos had to do with 19th century court fashion. If he heard about a temple fair, or a medium's convention, or a comedy hall, or a *luuk thung* concert – Philip was off to see it.



Only someone with great curiosity – and energy to match – could have written this book.

In the process, Philip ended up taking an entirely new approach to Thai pop culture. My mathematics teacher in high school used to jump on the table and shout at us: "The secret of life is to look deeply into simple things!" This is what Philip has done. *Very Thai* looks at the simple things of daily life that Thais and foreigners usually pass by, but in these very details lie the mystery and magic of what it is to be Thai.

The chapters link the past to the present, and Thailand to the outside world. They hint at delicate connections between the zany and wonderful, and often beautiful forms that Thai pop takes. Unlike most writing about Thai culture, it's not a book about the past, but a book about now. At the same time, *Very Thai* is a precious documentary of many customs that are dying away, or transmuting as Thailand loses a bit of its 'Thainess' and blends into world mass culture. It's a snapshot of a moment in time.

A book seemingly about trivia and trifles, *Very Thai* is about Thailand's very soul. As such it has a truly transformative power. I know that I can never look the same way again at a motorcycle taxi boy's jacket, a potted plant, fairy lights, a little pink napkin, a blue pipe, or the number nine.

left: The portrait and flag of King Bhumibol on a house in Thonburi. PCS

above: Thais put flag colours on countless things, like this wind vane in Suphanburi. PCS