



TRAVEL BY DESIGN

A trio of design insiders – **Arren Williams** in Portugal, **John Baker** in Japan and **Hedvig Alexander** in Uzbekistan – share how an adventure abroad can open your eyes to a new style of living



OLHAO, PORTUGAL

PHOTOS BY VASCO CELIO

“Why Olhao?” It’s a question we often get asked about where we’re currently living, the subtext being, “why would you trade Toronto for a small fishing port on the south coast of Portugal?” The answers are simple: the light, the food, the beaches, the pace of life, and for me, the design.

We ended up in Olhao after falling for the gritty charm of its old town while house-hunting, scoring a just-renovated spot from a couple who’s own home is a mouth-wateringly cool study in contemporary white and pink by celebrated Portuguese architect Bak Gordon. And thanks to the fact that my husband is tapped into a program that allows him a year’s sabbatical from teaching every five years, papers were quickly signed, flights booked, bags packed and we were on our way.

For me, stepping away from the busyness that was life back in Toronto and wandering the maze of cobblestone alleys of the old town is a chance for major inspiration – not to mention Instagram catnip – discovering the cubist architecture of the fisherman’s cottages with exteriors in bright white stucco or tiled in pattern-clash combos worthy of Miuccia Prada.

The art of Joana Rosa Bragança is another one of my favourite Olhanese discoveries. Her illustrations feel pulled from childhood dream worlds (think Beatrix Potter meets Maurice Sendak) but it’s the black and white mustachioed men and saggy-breasted women from her series on beaches that made it onto our walls.

Tiles wow here at every turn, no more

so than at Casa do Polvo in nearby Santa Luzia. Dubbed the octopus capital of Portugal, this town is where it’s at to savour a cephalopod any way you like. At the restaurant – where they go through a rather startling 15 tons of octopus every year – I always hit the carpaccio and stare admiringly at the stunning hand-painted tile mural by artist Fonseca Martins.

In Faro, the regional capital just west of Olhao, the new showroom of interior design and architecture firm Space Invaders punches well above its weight from a design cred perspective. Big names like Vitra, Molteni & C and Gubi mix and mingle with Portuguese brands and artisanal finds, highlighting how good contemporary design looks in the area’s more traditional interiors. But whether the look is rustic or modern, for me, Portuguese living is all about white walls and perfect sunlight.

Case in point, Casa Modesta, an old family home with views over the spectacular Ria Formosa, which was thoughtfully reconceived by PAR Architects into a clean-lined modern nine-bedroom hotel. Built as a concept that respects traditional building styles and local materials while interpreting them through a contemporary lens, it has been busy since it opened. Come for the design, but stay for the breakfast, which is so generous it almost bows the Canadian Douglas fir table designed for the barrel-vaulted dining room.

Arren Williams is a freelance stylist and design editor, as well as the former creative director of home at Hudson’s Bay.



PATTERN TEST Olhao’s streetscape (left) explodes with graphic tiles that can also be found at Casa do Polvo (top right and below). Artist Joana Rosa Bragança (middle right), hotel Casa Modesta (top left and bottom right) and design destination Space Invaders (above) interpret the aesthetic with contemporary flair.



ON LOCATION

CASA DO POLVO
Located in Santa Luzia on Portugal’s southwest coast, this destination restaurant goes through 15 tons of octopus every year.
+351-281-328-527

CASA MODESTA
The nine rooms at this family home turned contemporary hotel come with private patios that access an organic garden.
www.casamodesta.pt

SPACE INVADERS
This design space hosts a range of contemporary international brands alongside traditional Portuguese housewares and furniture.
www.spaceinvadersdesign.com



MATSUMOTO, JAPAN

PHOTOS BY JULI DAoust BAKER



MADE IN JAPAN Must-see spots in Matsumoto include soba spot Sanjiro (below right), Ryuji Mitani's gallery 10cm (top right) and Hoshinoya Karuizawa (above and below).



I take a lot of inspiration from the beauty of everyday experiences. Having travelled to Japan seven times, always with an eye out for design and craft, Matsumoto in Nagano Prefecture is my go-to small city where I can tap into Japan's aesthetic and local life.

A short train ride from Tokyo, Matsumoto isn't a place where you'll find a lot of Western tourists even though it's home to many important cultural landmarks including Matsumoto Castle (a massive structure constructed entirely of wood), the Matsumoto City Museum of Art (home to a permanent collection of Yayoi Kusama's work) and galleries featuring Mingei folk art and furniture.

What brought me and my wife to the town was a visit to Japan's most famous wood artisan Ryuji Mitani, who recently opened a small gallery space and café called 10cm. Tucked away down an alleyway among low industrial buildings, the location was previously a cigar shop. Past a pair of sliding doors is a small but bright gallery space with beautiful wood bowls, spoons and trays. Along with Ryuji Mitani's own creations, he stocks ceramics and crafts by other Japanese craftspeople, and antiques he has found during his travels.

Just a short distance away, behind a minimalist white wall with a narrow opening and an indigo-dyed *noren* curtain printed with Japanese characters that reads "Sanjiro", is the entrance to one of the best soba restaurants in all of Japan. The owner greets us in a beautiful blue kimono. After being seated

at our table, out comes cold soba in a delicious salty broth and chewy noodles topped with crisp green onions and fresh wasabi. All of the ceramic crockery is locally made and has been in use for decades. It's a beautiful experience to see the subtle patina that's developed on each piece and to appreciate the care and respect that goes into keeping them in good condition for so many years.

The local Hoshinoya Karuizawa ryokan resort is nestled in nature, with contemporary villas dotted along a peaceful river that glows with floating candles at night. Rooms are fragrant with the smell of cedar from a Hinoki cypress tub, accented by a bowl of Shinshu apples the size of grapefruits. We indulge in the private spa, then dress in a summer kimono known as a *yukata* and head to the inn's restaurant to enjoy a modern interpretation of Japanese *kaiseki*, a multi-course tasting menu that uses fresh and seasonal ingredients sourced nearby.

The most memorable dish of the evening is the Shinshu beef. It is a melt-in-your-mouth fatty steak from a very happy cow who spent its life gorging on more of those supersized apples. I'm looking forward to taking a nice long soak with a cold bottle of sake once we are back in our room, with that fragrant fruit bobbing in the chin-high water.

John Baker is the co-owner of Mjölkl, a gallery and lifestyle store focused on Japanese and Scandinavian design, in Toronto's Junction neighbourhood.

ON LOCATION

HOSHINOYA KARUIZAWA
A campus of minimalist guest pavilions set along a serene river in a dense forest make up this ryokan-style resort.
www.hoshinoyakaruizawa.com

MATSUMOTO CASTLE
Japan's oldest castle was built more than 400 years ago from hemlock, spruce and fir and incorporates a gun museum on its second floor.
www.myoko-nagano.com

SANJIRO
Make a reservation at this popular soba spot known for its minimal decor, refined tableware and delicious noodle dishes.
+81 263-35-0234





BUKHARA, UZBEKISTAN

PHOTOS BY HEDVIG ALEXANDER & EDWARD ADDEO

My first visit to Uzbekistan happened while I was living in Moscow in 2003. Having grown up during the Cold War, I could not believe I now had access to Russia and Central Asia. As a child, my father had told me about the Silk Road – in my mind, it had always been the ultimate seductive image of faraway lands.

So naturally I jumped at my first chance to go to Uzbekistan. Samarkand's public square and the holy city of Bukhara with its ancient mosques were as magical as I had imagined. Little did I know then that Central Asia would become my home a decade later and that Islamic art and architecture would become the passion that would inspire my business.

In 2002 I moved to Kabul, entering Afghanistan through neighbouring Uzbekistan. There, I ran Turquoise Mountain, an organization dedicated to reviving Afghan arts, crafts and architecture. We looked to Afghanistan's neighbours for help – countries whose arts had not suffered a 30-year setback.

Every May, the ancient Uzbek city of Bukhara hosts the Silk and Spice Festival, when the entire city is transformed by arts and crafts. It involves endless stalls of fabrics, beautiful ceramics, *suzani* embroidery and spices. Iconic *madrassas* and ancient mosques become homes for workshops and presentations. It feels like being in a living museum, with men still sitting on wooden beds in traditional outfits, drinking tea while playing chess. Everywhere you look, there is inspiration, from the bold colours of the dazzling blue tilework on buildings to the richly patterned clothes of ordinary people. Even the bread is exuberantly decorated, with round loaves covered in swirls of dyed seeds in hot pink, cobalt blue and saffron yellow. I would buy them still warm and eat them with hot black sweet tea.

The legendary weaving workshops in the lush Fergana Valley were always our next stop. They are home to the famous ikat fabric – a woven cloth in silk or cotton in trademark zigzag patterns. These are dyed onto the threads before the fabric is woven, creating unpredictable blurred edges where colours and patterns change. In Uzbek, the ikat technique is called *abrbandi* which means "to tie or bind the clouds," illustrating the almost mystical importance of this ancient craft.

My friend Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov runs a weaving *madrassa* in the city of Margilan. His family has been ikat weavers for many generations. Unlike many of the remaining ikat workshops, he remains dedicated to reviving traditional techniques, motifs and patterns.

Years later, when the time came to leave the region, I could not think of a better way than to slowly travel north through Central Asia by car from Kabul to Moscow. It was February when we set out. Uzbekistan looked very different at -40. Against the grey snow, the dusty colours of the brick and bold hues of the traditional decorative tile-work stood out even brighter.

As we drove, I thought about what a privilege it had been to be immersed in the beauty of Islamic arts and how it had changed the way I see things and the way I live. Central Asia's design universe is clean, modern and sophisticated because it relies on geometry, proportions and discipline. It is a vernacular that is minimalist and refreshingly non-materialistic. It made me want fewer things, but items of greater beauty and higher quality with meaning and with soul. ✎

Hedvig Alexander is the founder of Far & Wide Collective, a design e-tailer devoted to connecting artisans in emerging economies to international markets.



COLOUR YOUR WORLD Travelling and living in Uzbekistan, Hedvig Alexander marvelled at the bold hues of local clothing (below), market staples (top left) and the process of creating ikat textiles (opposite page).



ON LOCATION

BUKHARA
Uzbekistan's fifth-largest city is located close to the border of Turkmenistan, about a seven-hour drive from the capital Tashkent.

MARGILAN
Located along the Silk Road, Margilan is a destination for silk production and the weaving of ikat textiles.

SILK AND SPICE FESTIVAL
Every spring, this celebration of Bukhara's cultural heritage including embroidery, carpet making and cooking takes over the city.

For more information on travelling to Uzbekistan, visit the tourism site www.welcomeuzbekistan.uz

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