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PONDICHERRY'S HIDDEN GEM

La Villa celebrates colonial heritage

By Mohammad Khan



Every person has a dream and a story behind it and not everyone is able to realize theirs.

The life of Pi Patel was extraordinary and although there is no tiger, hyena or orang-utan in Segiyane Sylvain Paqutry's hotels, his story is just as captivating. Pi Patel and Segiyane Paqutry share more than just a fascinating tale; they both have a special connection with Pondicherry. The group's latest boutique hotel, La Villa, is perhaps his life exemplified. In order to understand the present we must travel back three decades.

Although a French citizen, he moved to India at the age of twelve. His parents are Pondicherian and speak Tamil fluently. He attended the Lycee until his baccalaureate and with a twist that is straight out of a novel, La Villa as it turns out is situated across the narrow Rue Surcof Ave overlooking the Lycee. He headed back to Paris to study commerce. He tried it for a couple of years however his passion lay in hospitality and he made the change to pursue it. In 2000 he began traveling to India in a bid to find emotion. He returned to his hometown in 2006 and it was then

that he came across the greenish grey guest house, Villa Elena, which was not doing successfully. Right behind Villa Elena was Shanti Guest house, an unsightly 80's built building.

With french architects Tina Trigala and Yves Lesprit a their vision for the group first hotel, both properties were leased and after 4 years of renovation, the midrange Villa Shanti boutique hotel in the city's colourful French Quarter was opened. Two years later he gave Pondicherry La Villa, the 19th-century home called Villa Notre Dame de la Garde which was transformed into an intimate six-bedroom hotel, celebrating its colonial heritage, whilst weaving it with a modern Zen design. Though they target different audiences, both properties share the same principles of transparency, honesty and simplicity.

Pondicherry is a unique blend of old world French charm, mixed with the cacophony of bustling South India and the spirituality of yogic philosophy of ashram. Like many other Indian cities booming with the economic miracle in India, Pondicherry is seeing development.

However for an area with such a history, the people governing and rebuilding the town are relentlessly short-termist: knock down that crumbling mansion, put a shiny new building in its place. There are dozens of beautifully preserved houses and streets, especially in the French quarter. The beautiful colonial buildings of "white

town" and the classic Tamil villas of "black town" are not protected. Several hundred listed heritage buildings have been lost in the past decade, according to the conservation body Intach (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage). The residents are increasingly worried about the rapid development to their slower and refined way of life. And it is this cause Segiyane and his friends want to champion; to preserve the colonial era architecture and the simplicity of Pondicherian life of his youth.

Villa is unique compared to its competition in its vision of adaptive reuse and heritage conservation. In bringing La Villa to life Segiyane has teamed up again with Tina Trigala and Yves Lesprit, who are the architects responsible for Villa Shanti. "Without Tina there lacked a direction to move forward," says Segiyane. She helped in guiding the vision for adaptive reuse, which helped give a second life to the colonial era building. She also takes care of quality control, development and strategy of both properties, in one word, spirit. The original features of the villa have been preserved where possible, keeping in mind a new floor had to be built; while in the new section Trigala and Lesprit have worked with contemporary materials to highlight the differences in period and style, rather than guise the modern in a faux colonial façade. My particular favourite design aspect is the incorporation of a one hundred year old tree

in courtyard that rises up through the floor. In keeping the tree, the architects have in every sense of the word preserved the building. This feature also makes for a tranquil, romantic setting for candle-lit dinners.

The lobby maintains the original ceiling beams and columns while the floors have been replaced with concrete and cement tiles. The bedrooms and bathrooms feature great natural lighting, which changes the atmosphere of the rooms. The balconies have a nice sit out space with trees and plants, so without having left your room, you will feel that you are outside. In fact you would not want to venture outside unless for a walk by the beach. La Villa helps the community by use of indigenous products and local sourcing of furniture. They promote local artisans who have made handmade tiles and bamboo doors for the hotel.

Clever re-purposing of items has also taken place; soap holders were used to grind turmeric for skin care; headboards have been fashioned from reclaimed teakwood doors sourced from the city's antiques markets; and vintage lanterns used for lightning. Imported French linens and divine toiletries from Fragonard are matched with simple bamboo accents from local markets. Not only is there great care but thought applied to the finishing of the bathrooms, which have

slip free tiling and the terry-cloth bathrobes add a nice touch. Most large hotels these days do not pay attention to this and as a result there is marble flooring in the bathrooms and low quality bathrobes that result in itchy skin.

"How we've managed to match the two, the future and the past is what sets us apart — how we've given another life to these popular items from the street," says Segiyane.

La Villa is built around the idea of a poetic, intimate atmosphere and a sense of non-ostentatious luxury. Here light airy space has been designed for the eyes and the body. One is treated to antique silver and mother of pearl handled cutlery, European porcelain crockery and fine crystal glasses, whilst savouring fresh and flavourful local ingredients in a tranquil setting.

One of the hidden gems of Pondicherry, La Villa has a final ace up its sleeve; its food. In fact not much is mentioned about his magic on the articles written on La Villa. The food at La Villa is indeed a treat.

From breakfast, which can be enjoyed poolside, featuring delicious fresh fruits cut into delightful pictures on your plate, and traditional French pastries from the best local bakery, served with homemade jams. To dinner, where the salad is of such high quality and freshness, one would

think you were eating in Europe. Trigala and the chef have carefully devised the dinner menu, which is set to change every three months, so as to feature locally sourced ingredients which are in season. The selection on offer has something to satisfy everyone; the vegetarian, the carnivore or the pescatarian. My favourite was the lobster and although I can attempt to describe the scrumptious meat and sauce sinking in my mouth, I think it is an experience best felt and tasted rather than described.

Through to the desserts, which are a mouth-wateringly scrumptious selection, featuring divine 70% cocoa mousse; fresh fruit tarts (with figs, mango and coconut grown on the property) encased in crispy home-made pastry; seasonal fruit sorbet, and gastronomic foams.

Segiyane believes that regardless of what hotel you run or what training you impart to staff, if there is no passion and connection in the team, then the service will falter. As a result the staff are wonderful, naturally hospitable and knowledgeably; I had great conversations with Satya and Kavitha and learnt things about the city that I had not in my prior three trips.

Every person has a dream and a story behind it and not everyone is able to realize theirs. With La Villa, Segiyane Paqutry certainly has.

