

CASA, TASTE, TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE

Vogue LIVING

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The family enjoys weekend meals poolside, on a wooden table with Spanish detailing

CASA GYPSY KINGS

Just south of Mumbai, singer **SAGARIKA** and entrepreneur **MARTIN DA COSTA**'s Provence-style Alibaug home is an enchanting escape from the urban cacophony, finds BHAIRAVI JHAVERI

Sagarika and Martin Da Costa with their sons, Joshua (left) and Michel



Photographed by ADIL HASAN

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Portuguese-style glazed tiles in the kitchen. Inset: Grilled local fish, tarli (oil sardine)

Smoke from freshly grilled fish fills the Portuguese-tiled kitchen. Sagarika dices eggplant, Martin tosses fish and clams with one hand and holds a cigar in the other. Music shuffles from European lounge to Katy Perry pop as the two drift about, now cooking; later, reading, sun-bathing, taking a dip in their infinity pool, sipping on Chilean wine and chasing their sons, Joshua, 9, and Michel, 6. At some point, Michel will grab a chicken by the tail, and Martin will roll his eyes and holler, "Put Heathrow down, *right now!*" (He eventually explains, "They've named the chickens Heathrow, Gatwick, 50 Cent...")

This is what the couple call "good stress"—there's not much time to sit down and put your legs up on the table (even if it's a beautiful wooden table by the pool, with Spanish details), but they're happy. They bought the four-acre Alibaug property in 2004 when it was nothing more than a deforested jungle atop a hill, away from other holiday homes by the beach. This is where Martin, founder of event-management firm Seventy Event Media Group, and Sagarika, a former Indi-pop singer who is now returning to the music business, come with their kids to escape the minutiae of Mumbai's city life. At least three times a month, they hop on a speedboat after school on Friday, to take in the joys of open space, farmland, greenery and good times with family and friends.

ORGANIC EVOLUTION

Designed and pieced together organically over two years, the one-level, Provence-style yellow stone house is as

splendid as it is casual: rustic and country with bits of contemporary undertones. "We travel very often. When we bought this land, Marty and I had visited various countries across the Mediterranean where we had stayed in village homes that owners rented out for the summer. I was obsessed with the vibrancy of those houses," says Sagarika, who has composed the quaint European picture in Alibaug without much professional help.

Walled by roughly 300 majestic trees, the property has three structures: the main house peeking through white bougainvillea, a guest room, and a cottage with more bedrooms. As you drive up, a narrow pathway leads you to a green expanse of land where the

boys can goof around with their Labrador Sniffy, jump on the trampoline, play football, test their aim with air-rifle shooting and romp about the pool. "They have no rules on weekends," says Martin. "That's a parenting tip we learnt from some friends. We let them do what they feel like and eat what they feel like when we come here—just like us."

What is now the main house, constructed on one flat level (except for the couple's bedroom), was initially set up to be a pool house. "But it worked just as well as the main house, so we let it be. Why keep building if we don't need to?" says Martin, who wanted the





Weekends see the boys goofing around

wooden trimming above the cooking range, a yesteryear dish dryer is a shelf by the bed, and an old wrought-iron butler's washstand has been given a sparkling new life. In two

areas—outside the guest room and above the dining area by the pool—waste wood features as beautiful canopies, allowing sunlight to filter through the rafters. “This we found straight from a Mediterranean interior magazine,” says Sagarika, almost sheepishly.

A carving here, a coat of paint there—gentle touches have turned worn accessories chic. Sudden bursts of colour—neon green stools, blue and orange throw cushions and a deep blue pool that is the nucleus of the house—smoothly offset the calm whites of the mattresses, the pastels in the kitchen and the yellow stone façade. The decor flits from quiet English accessories, flamboyant Portuguese accents and clean Greek whites to Tuscan homeliness and Provençal warmth.

The guest room, with its shelves of books, boasts assorted English elements picked up during the years the family spent in London from 2008 to >

farmhouse to be centred on the idea of sustainable development. The structure, made with stone and reclaimed wood, consumes very little power—there are few air conditioners, there's no Wi-Fi—and the landscaping has been designed to improve the microclimate and region's ecosystem.

GLOBAL ACCENTS

Sagarika has scoured markets like Mumbai's Lakda Bazaar (near Chor Bazaar) with skill. Vintage wooden windows with louvres are now kitchen cabinets, flush doors from a doctor's dispensary have been turned into static shutters on a cabinet, eaves off an old bungalow make for a delicate



The sleigh bed in the guest room-cum-library



Neon stools add colour to the kitchen



A Frida Kahlo cushion pops under an antique Cotswold mirror



The guest room façade features windows found at Lakda Bazaar



The fireplace sitting area by the pool



The main bathroom has a purple wooden mirror and outdoor elements like gravel flooring and plants



The couple's room extends into a bald balcony

2012—an antique mirror from the Cotswolds, a sleigh bed and drawer knobs from a car-boot sale pop against knick-knacks like a Frida Kahlo throw cushion and a Banksy print. The bathroom by the pool has been designed to feel like an open shower, with potted plants, gravel layering the floor and textured stucco walls. The kitchen is an open-plan area rich in Portuguese and Italian influences.

“We love to cook, Marty and I,” says Sagarika. “The excitement of the weekend begins with our trip to the supermarket on our way here. The kids pick up all their junk and we buy the local produce. The best part is, the kids are always happy to entertain our cooking experiments.” In winter, they whip up warm stews with chorizo and beans, while summer brings Mediterranean finger-food that can be eaten before or after a swim. If there’s company, the barbecue is used for grilling.

THE PASTORAL LIFE

There’s a Greek-style fireplace with a blue birdcage



The house is named for the fireflies that arrive in the monsoon



A jute cot on which to admire the view



Michel with a pet chicken

by the pool-side, around which the family gather during winter to exchange funny ghost stories. A bald balcony, adorned with simple fresco chairs and a table, is an extension of the parents’ room (situated right above the children’s room), where Martin and Sagarika can watch the sun dip into the horizon and the boys play in the pool.

The estate is named for the abundance of fireflies that light up the trees during the monsoon, and has been the only constant address for a couple who love to move base every few years. It is the one place to which they have returned while on work trips to India from London. “We lived in London for four years,” explains Martin. “I’m Anglo-Portuguese, so I lived in Portugal for the first 18 years of my life, and I have been in India for 17 years. In Mumbai we have lived in Bandra, and now we live in South Mumbai. Next, we may move to Rome for five or six years.” A few months ago, they even listed the house on the property rental website Airbnb.com, so now it can be enjoyed even when they’re not around.

They are gypsies at heart, say Sagarika and Martin, but somewhere along the way they’ve found a sense of permanence in the warm core of Firefly—replete with memories, laughter, good food and happy weekends basking in the sun. ■