

hôtel
vagabond
a garcha hotel

Garcha/Hotel Vagabond: media coverage table

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“BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING, GO ON TILL YOU COME TO THE END: THEN STOP”

So said the King of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*. Satinder Garcha is building his own Wonderland—one dotted with high-end residences and boutique hotels; no flamingo croquet here, but there's polo aplenty, thank you.

The beginning of this story, or at least as far back as he can remember, was a young boy fascinated with design and mechanics. “As a kid, I routinely took apart and put back together—not successfully most times—my toys and electronics, to see how they were built and how they worked. It was my hobby, my passion and my way of learning.”

The beginning of any successful property development project is in finding the plot, says the founder and CEO of Elevation Developments, a boutique luxury property developer. “There's an adage in real estate that one makes money when one buys, not when one sells. The biggest coup is finding a suitable building or site.”

His company, which was founded in 2005, specialises in luxury homes and good class bungalows—prime addresses it acquires, building in place of old buildings it tears down modern statement homes “not only constructed with superior materials but by superior ideas”, as the company website vaunts. His strategy is to own and lease them out for the long-term, selling only when there's sufficient upside—historically, tens of millions.

While the company continues to welcome prospective buyers who subscribe to its vision to get in touch (a footnote duly advises:

“Prices start from \$10m”), hotels are now on Satinder's drawing board. But he's not just into building them—he wants run them, and redefine the five-star luxury boutique hotel experience in the process.

Life. Experience. Experiment. Passion. Sanctuary. Fun. Six words that underscore the philosophy of Garcha Hotels, a hotel

management company that Satinder created in 2013 to gear up for his four boutique hotels in the pipeline. Part of its unique proposition: characterful old buildings that he's overhauled for sumptuous stays and excellent service.

THE ART OF MODERN LIVING

“Our passion is genuine old-world hospitality, extraordinary aesthetics and, most importantly, a fun-filled environment,” he says. In the last five years or so, he has picked up heritage properties including the old City Hotel in Santiago, Chile; and in Singapore, Murray Terrace acquired for \$75m and six shophouses in Syed Alwi Road for \$23m, both in 2012, and the \$50m Berjaya Hotel in Duxton Road (renamed The Duxton and to be revamped end this year) in 2013.

Hôtel Vagabond, the first property scheduled for launch, sits along the bustling Syed Alwi Road in Kampong Glam. The mid-century building reminded Satinder of Miami hotels such as the Delano, Raleigh and Betsy, of the same era and style.

“I fell in love with the symmetry and proportions of the building. It's similar to art deco buildings that were built in the 1950s in Tel Aviv, Bombay and Miami. It's different from the more ornate traditional shophouses in Singapore from the 1840s to 1960s era, and quite a rarity here too.”

With interiors emperor Jacques Garcia on board this project, the 41-room hotel is set for design distinction. It will keep its art-deco facade and original vermillion shutters, and get a full, modernising facelift inside that will include floor-to-ceiling golden trees hand-forged in Jaipur, and life-sized elephant sculptures emerging from pillars and walls.

Nomads staying the night will luxuriate on Italian-made Egyptian cotton sheets and be privy to Satinder's point of view in terms of the eclectic mix of framed photographs in each guestroom—all from his personal collection of travel shots.

This “art hotel” will boast an interesting edit of sculptures and artworks personally selected by Satinder and host art-themed programmes for guests. It will also be the first luxury boutique hotel with an artist-in-residence programme; deejays and tattooists

STAY ROOTED

The best hotel, for Satinder Garcha, is one that embodies the cultural and social heritage of its city

Shirt, cardigan and jacket, all by Berluti; watch by Breguet





“I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT GOD IS IN THE DETAILS”

are as welcome as painters and musicians. Two artist ateliers—spacious work-and-live studios with pull-down Murphy beds—will be sited on the highest floors.

DESIGN DEFINITION

Hôtel Vagabond's September opening runs half a year behind Satinder's initial plan, due to the complexity that comes with developing a heritage building, which called for a lengthier design and construction process than he had originally anticipated.

“Our primary architectural challenge is fitting a luxury hotel into a space that has been designed for another use over a hundred years ago,” he concedes. “Before we tear

down anything in the interior, we clean, dust and evaluate everything, and think hard about the possibilities. We have a diverse team of talented people on three continents working on each aspect, constantly questioning and evaluating. We go through multiple iterations and let the story unfold and evolve, and in many cases we end up in a different place from where we started.”

The New Delhi-born polo enthusiast likens business to the game. “Teamwork, discipline, how to win—because you want to win in the game, just as you want a winning, profit-making business. But it doesn't matter if you fail, because you'll get up again.”

Likening his role in each project's development to that of an editor's, he says, “It's my job to navigate this journey by laying down parameters within which my team members do what they each do best.”

Garcha Hotels has engaged Anouska Hempel Design (AHD) to revamp The Duxton. The elegant hotel, which will boast the highest room rates of the lot, will take on the new moniker, Blakes Singapore. AHD will also work on the transformation of Garcha Santiago, while Jacques Garcia will spearhead the design of Murray Terrace.

OLD SOUL
The iconic red shutters of the art deco shophouse that is now Hôtel Vagabond; Satinder sees hotels not just as places to stay, but social and intellectual hubs



With his hotels, Satinder is “very intricately involved in the design process”, down to the uniform of its doorman. He is there with his team at every single design meeting. “Every detail of material that once can be seen and touched goes through me.” This continues through to the day the hotel’s doors open. “This provides the cohesiveness I believe is necessary to achieve a great end result.”

A strict believer of seamless, top-notch service, all his hotels will go by a “dial zero for everything” policy—inspired by London’s Chiltern Firehouse, a hotel Satinder greatly admires. “I firmly believe that God is in the details. Each of our projects entails meticulous planning, attention to detail, intense scrutiny and zealous follow through. These values were instilled in me early on, when I went to boarding school at age nine.”

He spent seven years at The Lawrence School – Sanawar, an ex-British military boarding school in the secluded foothills of the Himalayas. Discipline and rigour were weaved into his daily routine, from the first bugle call at 6am to bedtime at 10pm. “The old philosophy was to drive the kids really hard and apply strong discipline and a strong sense of camaraderie. The school emphasised

not just academics, but extracurricular activity as well: sports, social work, etc. This stayed in my DNA.”

He still follows the regime of waking early and exercising regularly, especially since getting hooked on polo since he and wife Harpreet Bedi moved from the US to Singapore in 2001. Their move followed the sale of his IT consulting and contracting firm People.com in 2000 right before the dotcom bust, which propelled him into *Forbes*’ Singapore’s 50 Richest List in 2013.

For now, a typical day for him is packed with site visits and meetings with architects, designers, builders and hotel management teams. Despite this, he’s able to indulge in spending more time with family, attending parent-teacher sessions at his children’s school and, of course, fitting in polo several afternoons a week for leisure.

As he continues to build upon his fortunes with Garcha Hotels and Elevation Developments, Satinder does not plan an endpoint to his story of start-ups and success just yet: “I’m Sikh and Sikhism believes in a life of continual action. I intend to work hard to better myself and society, in all spheres. To do the best I can at all times.”

ECLECTIC MIX

Personal travel photographs shot by Satinder trigger wanderlust within Hôtel Vagabond’s guestrooms; Satinder at a polo game with Team Elevation teammate Joao Paulo Gannon