

TRAVEL WEEKLY ASIA



Making A Difference

OCTOBER 2016

www.travelweekly-asia.com

Published by Northstar Travel Media Singapore Pte Ltd ISSN 2382-6061 MCI (P) 012/07/2016 PPS 1849/09/2014 (025581)

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SILVER RUSH

They're wealthy active and ambitious. Today's older travellers have been there, done that. Now they are leaving their armchairs and looking for adventure wherever that may be. The challenge for the travel industry is to provide the unique experiences being demanded by a generation who won't stay at home.



Credit: glowonconcept

A PUKKA LIFE FOR A SINGAPORE HOTELIER

Satinder Garcha skipped Silicon Valley a decade or so ago to become a polo player and a property developer in Singapore, funded by a dot-com sale, he has become an owner of hotels that stand out from the crowd with their eye-catching interiors.

By Ian Jarrett

Indian-born Satinder Garcha, now a citizen of Singapore, is the son of retired colonel Kuldeep Singh Garcha, who was captain of India's national polo team.

Garcha grew up in a British, military-style boarding school at Sanawar, at the foothills of the Himalayas. "Life was about getting up at five in the morning every day and going for a run—wet or cold, windy or balmy," he once told Forbes magazine.

In January this year, Garcha Hotels opened Hotel Vagabond in

Singapore, billed as Singapore's first experience-driven luxury boutique hotel with a salon area designed to immerse guests "in the theatre of art, food, drink and conversation".

Currently, the hotel is undergoing a rebranding exercise, and come October, it will be unveiled as a Tribute Portfolio hotel under Starwood Hotels & Resorts – the first such brand for Singapore.

The name Vagabond was chosen because "it conjures up the notion of someone always travelling, moving on, experiencing new

things", which is exactly what Garcha wants his guests to do.

The heart and soul of Hotel Vagabond is the Vagabond Salon – a modern interpretation of a Parisian salon – where guests have the opportunity to mingle with resident artists over a cocktail, watch a performance or listen to a jazz quartet.

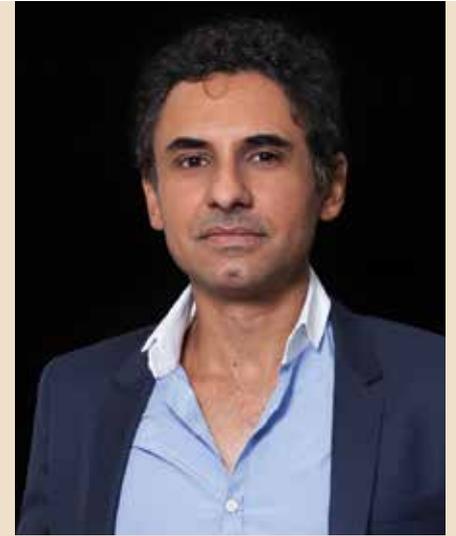
The solid brass rhino reception desk, took eight months to create across 15 villages in Rajasthan. The family who made it have been making armoury for the Rajasthani royal families for generations.

The hotel is also the first hotel in Asia to feature interiors by the French designer Jacques Garcia. Garcia is best known for his design of Hotel Costes in Paris, Hotel Danielli in Venice, Hotel Mamounia in Marrakech, and most recently the Nomad in New York.

Life-size elephants 'hoisting' up the main elevator are iconic of Garcia's style and made painstakingly in France by the artist Franck Le Ray.



Left: Vagabond Hotel Singapore façade; top: The hotel interiors are by French designer Jacques Garcia.



Satinder Garcha.

1. What attracted you to Singapore and subsequently the hospitality and property businesses?

Singapore is a great cosmopolitan city but with strong Asian values and roots. It's also close to home – India.

2. The Vagabond has a strong emphasis on theatre and art - how important is this in creating a unique experience for guests?

This is the essence of the hotel. It's the only one of its kind to have 'live' artists living in the hotel who will mingle with guests. The only pre-requisite is that the artists engage with guests at the hotel during their stay and leave something of their art behind when they leave. Apart from that, I can't overstate the importance of the basics in creating a great hotel - 'genuine old world hospitality'.

3. You went to a boarding school in the Himalayas. What did that teach you that has been relevant to your future life and business career?

One learns basic human values – hard work, tenacity, perseverance, camaraderie and, most importantly, fun.

4. What is your philosophy on life?

That's a big one – work hard, play hard, and care for others.

5. How do you hire staff? What qualities do you look for?

Garcha Hotels is always looking for crafts people, with robust attention to detail, a passion for business and most importantly, an attitude of 'care' for our guests. We want an entrepreneurial culture that fosters teamwork, but also a diversity of perspective and honest discourse. ■