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An elephant in the lobby, a monkey at the bar!

ALL THAT SHNAZZ By Alexei F. Villaraza (The Philippine Star) | Updated December 19, 2015 - 12:00am

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"Its background has a slightly seedy history — it was once a brothel, an opium den and a KTV lounge!" says Satinder Garcha, the self-made dot-com millionaire entrepreneur turned luxury real-estate developer and boutique hotelier of Garcha Hotels, including Hotel Vagabond.

If you find yourself in Little India and Kampong Glam in Singapore and spot a concrete building with red shutters, you wouldn't think that the property has lived many lives.

"Its background has a slightly seedy history — it was once a brothel, an opium den and a KTV lounge!" says Satinder Garcha, the self-made dot-com millionaire entrepreneur turned luxury real-estate developer and boutique hotelier of Garcha Hotels. Despite its rather colorful past, Garcha has transformed the traditional art deco structure into a hip establishment that's also pure eye candy for heritage building aficionados, art lovers and design enthusiasts alike.

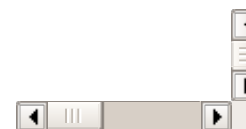
The first thing you notice when you enter the lobby of Hotel Vagabond are the elephants. Characteristic of the style of the hotel's designer, Jacques Garcia, the big, gold mammals are poised as if they're hoisting up the elevators. Then there's the gleaming rhinoceros. Next to it are brass banyan trees that serve as pillars, and at the bar you will spy a gold monkey behind the counter. But these aren't just any ordinary

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aureate animals. The life-size elephants and monkey sculpture are made by French sculptor Franck Le Ray; the pillars were made through delicate metalwork created by centuries old artisanal techniques; and the solid brass rhino, which is actually the hotel's fancy reception desk, took eight months to create across 15 villages in Rajasthan in western India. The family who made it has been making armory for the Rajasthani royal family for generations.

"I had a very clear vision of how I wanted the hotel to look and feel. I'm delighted that it is exactly how I imagined," shares Garcha.

The art isn't just found on the ground floor. There's even a seven-minute video art installation playing in the lifts by Marco Brambilla, a Milan-born, New York City-based video collage and installation artist known for this elaborate re-contextualization of popular and found imagery. In the 41 richly decorated rooms are Garcha's personal collection of paintings as well as photographs he's taken of his winning international polo team and travels around the world. The public areas exhibit art that has been especially curated and collected by him.

"The photograph of Julia Calfee of the Chelsea Hotel in New York really sums up the spirit I'm trying to create at the hotel — free spirited, a little cheeky but always great fun."

Chelsea Market Hotels

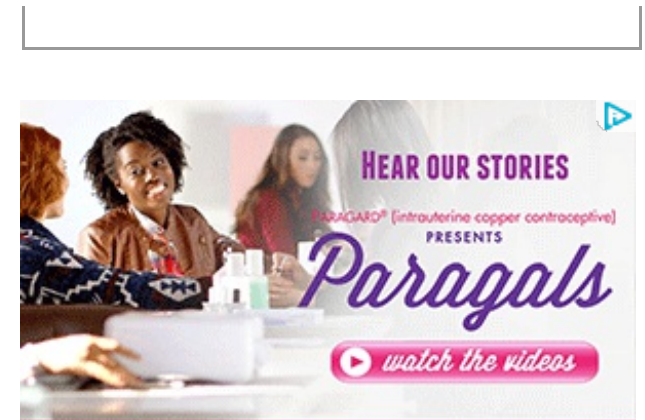
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The collection also includes work by Michael Platnic, Marco Lopez and Leon Ferrari.

Home for Artists

Aside from the stellar works, what Garcha is most proud of is Hotel Vagabond's artist-in-residence program, a first in Singapore. "I wanted to create a program where artists from all disciplines and geographies could come and stay and contribute something of their art to the hotel but also feel creatively inspired by its energy and that of its guests."



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So far, artists who have participated in the program include DJ Synapse from New York and, currently, DJ Captain Planet from Los Angeles, who has created special musical mixes for the hotel and has also performed on regular nights at Vagabond Salon, the hotel's swanky lounge. "They are invited to stay up to three months. All we ask is that they engage with guests, leave something behind when they checkout."

Every 6 p.m., guests get the chance to chat with an artist over specially crafted cocktails, dine while a fashion show is happening, watch an independent film, listen to a jazz quartet, or dance to the beats of the DJ-in-residence. Atelier rooms are provided and specifically designed to accommodate artists of different persuasions.

Sense Surround

The name of the hotel conjures up the idea of a constant traveler, a digital nomad, and someone who is always on the move to seek out new experiences —many of which can be encountered at Hotel Vagabond.

The different dining outlets at Hotel Vagabond boast fanciful flair. Guests can enjoy a five-star dining experience courtesy of 5th Quarter, a collaboration between Garcha and celebrated restaurateur Loh Lik Peng. Run by award-winning executive chef Andrew Nocente, it offers cuisine using traditional methods of curing meats with the aid of modern instruments to maintain the integrity of flavors.

Drinks are served from the Vagabond Bar, conceptualized by head barman Mauricio Allende and renowned drinks collective Proof & Company. They offer an eclectic rotating selection of handcrafted cocktails, artisan spirits and wines, and a curated collection of rare and exotic teas and coffees. Craftsmanship will be the central feature of Vagabond Bar's style, with drinks that blend an unexpected attention to detail with a generous measure of theater.

Master Builder

The 1950s-era property is the first in Garcha's bevy of luxury hotels housed in a heritage building. "We had to work around much of the original structure," explains Garcha. He finds it more exciting to work with the building's character and how it fits into the makeup of the city. "The rooms at Hotel Vagabond come in different shapes and sizes; the original façade is very much intact. We have kept the original window panes and staircases."

Garcha finds working with heritage buildings much more interesting than a new structure as they come with a history all of their own. "With Hotel Vagabond, I fell in love with the symmetry and proportions of the building. It's different from the more ornate traditional shop houses in Singapore and it's quite a rarity here."



The advertisement features the Best Western logo at the top. Below it, the text "Celebrate the Season" is written in a decorative, cursive font. The main offer is "Save 10% OR MORE AND GET 500 BONUS POINTS ON EVERY STAY WHEN YOU BOOK AT BESTWESTERN.COM". A prominent orange button with a white play icon and the text "BOOK NOW" is centered below the offer. At the bottom, a photograph shows a family of three (a woman, a young girl, and a man) smiling and playing in the snow. Small text at the bottom of the ad reads: "Offer ends 2/7/16. Other restrictions apply. Visit bestwestern.com for complete terms and conditions. Each Best Western® branded hotel is independently owned and operated."

Garcha will soon be opening another boutique hotel named Blakes Singapore, which was converted from a row of eight 100-year-old shop-houses. In 2017, he plans to open Murray House, which is currently an office building that he has plans on transforming: from a 1920s structure into a 160-room hotel. There's another historic property in Chile, which was the former City Hotel in Santiago. It was once described as the "great dame" during its golden years.

"I have worked in property development for a few years and was inspired by my frequent traveling and staying in different hotels all over the world so it seemed like a natural progression," he shares. "I wanted to not just build but to run them, too — and redefine the five-star luxury boutique hotel experience in the process."

* * *

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