

DESTINATION PUDUCHERRY

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Welcome

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The small hostelry set in the idyllic French town of Puducherry fuses elements of Colonial style with contemporary chic and street smartness. A pale grey oasis of calm, Villa Shanti has already become a magnet, attracting the discerning traveller

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Verandah seating outside the bar. Rounded columns with arches on the left are from the old colonial structure, while new additions on the right are straightline, demarcating old from new. The tables are by Tina Trigala and chairs by Martine Mallard, (a French carpenter in Puducherry), all made locally

Left In the bedroom, a large calligraphic illustration denoting welcome in Tamil by a local hoarding painter, Murugan. The headboard section and side slabs are covered with Chettinad tiles, while the fabric clad lamp is from Paris

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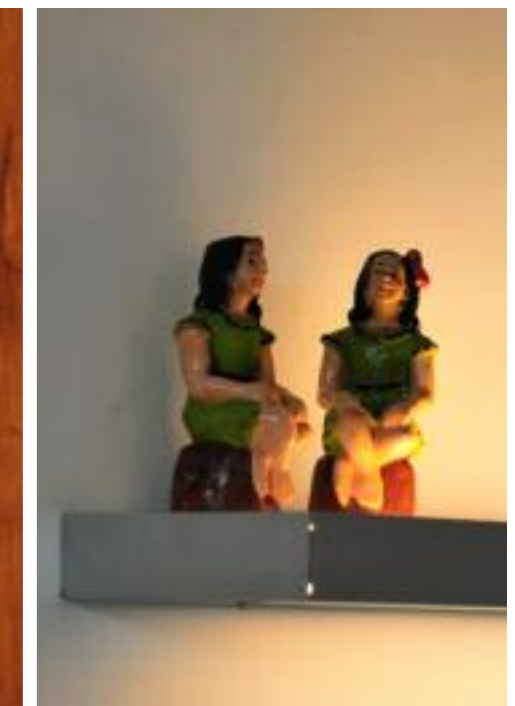
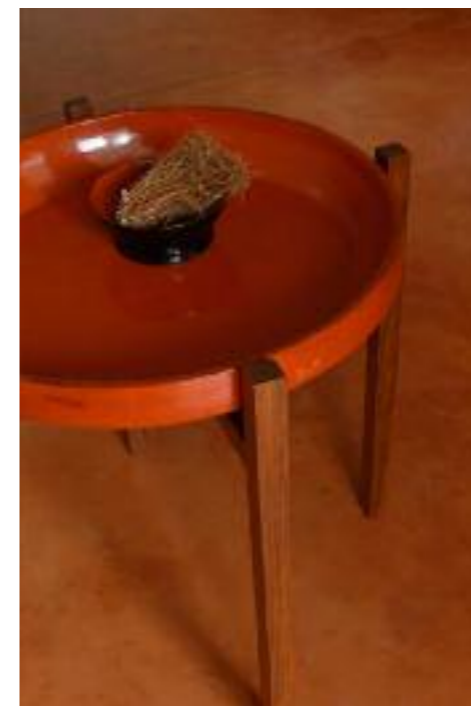
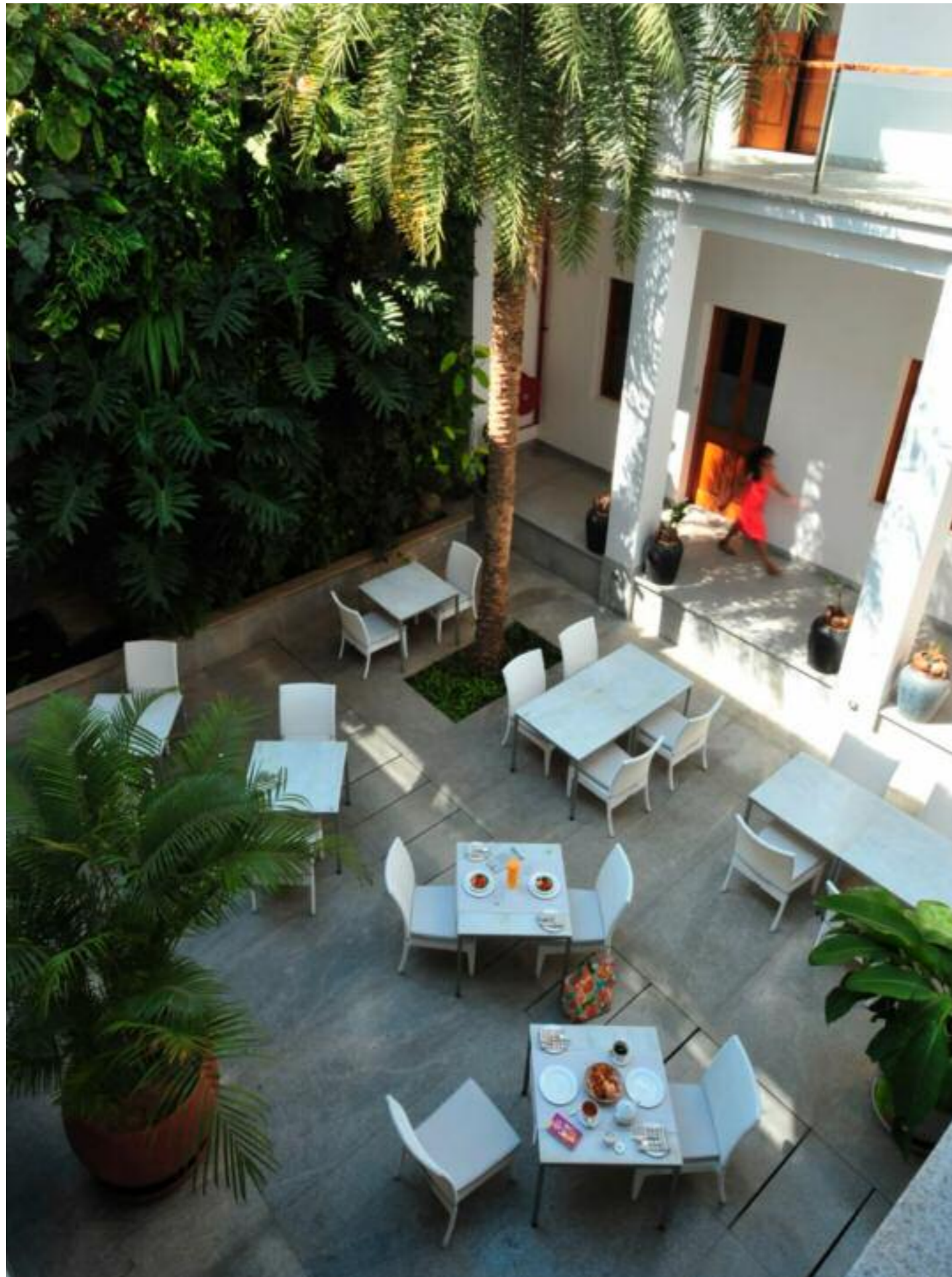
The step down, pale grey granite courtyard in the heart of the hotel has generous verandahs on three sides and on the fourth, a thriving tropical vertical garden, two storeys high and topped with a small champa tree. Sitting on a white rattan chair, I close my eyes and let the voices waft over me – all speaking French. It's a surreal experience and takes a while getting used to: So many deep complexioned South Indians, including our host Paquiry Segiyane Sylvain, all speaking only in that tongue, their English broken and heavily accented, when you naturally expect them to converse in Tamil or lilted Tamlish. "There are about 6,000 French citizens in this town, some French-Indian like me, others completely European," he explains, as if he can read my thoughts.

Villa Shanti sits in the middle of Rue Suffren amid ochre painted, 18th century French colonial homes all tucked away behind compound walls bursting with bright bougainvillea cascades. Its pale beige grey exterior, subtle signage and discrete entrance don't prepare you for the chic modernity inside. The short corridor with the reception on one side has a white, cotton half curtain that visually prevents the onlooker from getting a direct view of the entire structure, forcing the eye to run lower, focusing on the central open space, the active hub of the establishment.

Brainchild of two French women, an Indian and an Indo French, the hotel took over four years to complete, opening its doors around Christmas 2011. "I was in Pondi visiting my mother," elaborates Segiyane, the Indo French partner and managing director "when I learnt about the availability of this property, so I immediately set the ball rolling." The 200-year-old structure was restored by Parisian architects Yves Lesprit and Tina Trigala and based on the principles of 18th and 19th century colonial French construction, a modern extension was conceptualised by the duo with a dynamic synergy to the heritage wing.

ITS...SUBTLE SIGNAGE AND DISCRETE ENTRANCE DON'T PREPARE YOU FOR THE CHIC MODERNITY INSIDE

Below, from Left Red oxide flooring complements the side table by Tina executed by Mallard with a Burmese lacquer platter from Chettinad as table top. In the smaller bowl, a bundle of vetiver acts as a natural room freshener; The discrete entrance of the hotel has a brass knocker found in a Parisian flea market and a fragment of an old Kerala carving; A couple of Chettinad terracotta dolls accessorise a shelf in one of the rooms Left An aerial view of the central courtyard, the active hub of the establishment. The flooring is rough granite while the rattan furniture is from Weavecraft in New Delhi. On the far end, the tropical vertical garden has been designed by Jan Duclos, a French botanist working in Asia since the last 30 years



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Circular mirrors found in a Chennai bazaar form an arresting mural at one end of the reception. On the sideboard designed by Tina and executed by Mallard, a lamp from Pondimania

Left An open bar at one end of the courtyard has a mural by Murugan based on a sketch by French graphic designer, Elizabeth May, who was instrumental for the visual identity of the hotel. The stools are from the local market



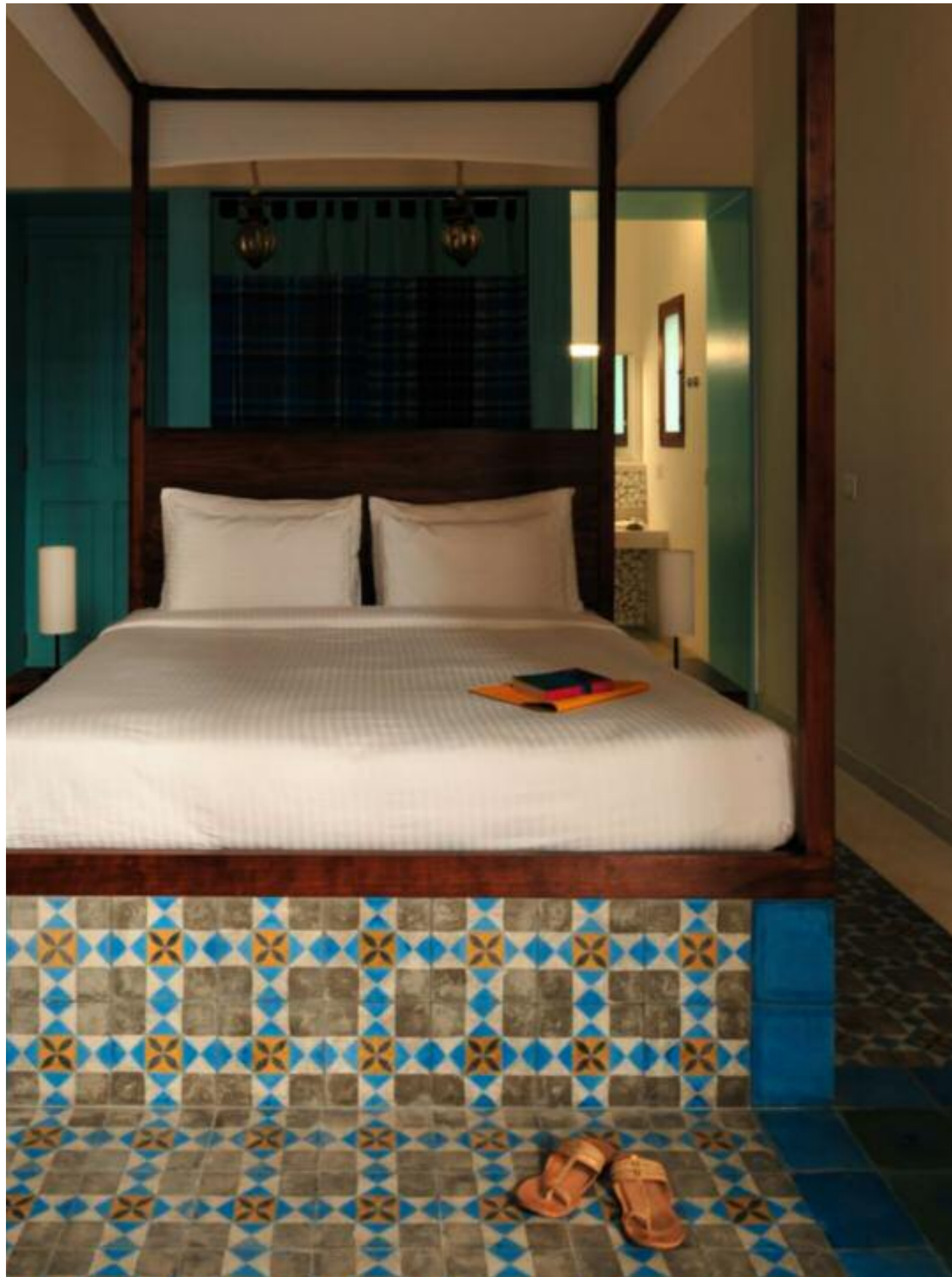
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Both Tina and Yves are passionate about their work and are willing to go that extra mile for the finish they want, and this is evident in the detailing throughout. "It is a 21st century reinterpretation of the villa style with open balconies and verandahs overlooking the square," says Tina. "We worked only with local materials and local contractors and recycled as much as we could. In the public spaces we used easy to maintain granite, but in the rooms laid traditional oxide flooring in varied colours, done by some people in Pondicherry." Yves continues, "The biggest challenge we faced was to get the necessary quality. So there was continual sampling till we were satisfied." Tina with her twinkling eyes and ready laughter interrupts, "My idea was to blend street fashion in a smart contemporary setting. Who says you need to spend copious amounts of money to be stylish?" I ask her if the half curtain at the end of the entrance corridor was an old French tradition. "No," she says, "I wanted to create a sense of drama, a curtain raiser, a sort of spatial teaser, giving a hint but not revealing the entire picture."

The furniture was designed by Tina and executed by neighbouring craftsmen. The colour palette was deliberately kept muted to provide a soothing break from the hot sun and contrast with the overwhelmingly yellow buildings around. It is their first experience of working in India, so I ask them about it. Tina answers for both, "After four years of visiting your beautiful country regularly, we have grown to love this place so much and have a wonderful rapport with the artisans, that we are already working on a second project." And judging from the manner in which they have transformed the erstwhile Shanti Guesthouse to this smart and understated luxe establishment, I can safely predict the success of their next venture. Seems like exciting times ahead for high end tourism! ♦

“MY IDEA WAS TO BLEND STREET FASHION IN A SMART CONTEMPORARY SETTING...” – TINA TRIGALA

Below, from Left Detail of a painted floral motif by Murugan on a wardrobe wall; Crockery from Ocean, a local brand, on shelves partially hidden by a lungi curtain; The bathrooms have broken tile mosaic as splashbacks. The laundry basket is from the Livelihoods Trust working with women in neighbouring villages, while the handmade soap from Auroville rests on a round granite base Left One of the rooms: A bed on a base of cement covered with handprinted bricks from Chettinad. Handi lights from a local market form the main illumination, while the curtain behind is a simple cotton lungi fitted with loops. The bedside lamps are from Pondimania.



The ELLE DECOR team travelled and stayed in Puducherry courtesy Villa Shanti. Website: www.lavillashanti.com

