

MOHAN MURJANI

THE VANDERBILT ESTATE IN PHUKET IS THE ULTIMATE LABOUR OF LOVE, BORN OUT OF THE BUSINESSMAN'S DESIRE TO BRING A REGENCY-STYLE ENGLISH MANOR TO THE IDYLIC TROPICAL DESTINATION. HELLO! GETS AN EXCLUSIVE TOUR OF THIS GRAND VILLA, PAINSTAKINGLY BUILT OVER SEVEN YEARS

Imagine a magnificent, picturesque home, swathed in wrap-around terraces and immaculately manicured lawns. An English manor straight out of a fairy tale. That's The Vanderbilt Estate, the luxurious mansion that businessman Mohan Murjani lovingly, painstakingly built in the idyllic destination of Phuket in Thailand.

Designed in 19th-century Regency architectural style from the Georgian period, the grand villa is a unique, heavenly abode, filled with birdsong and butterflies, spread over 12 acres.

"I wanted to build something special, a Shangri-La, my dream house," says Murjani. "It was my dream to use my lifetime of experiences to build an estate that would respect nature, and only embrace authentic architecture, high-quality natural materials and art, while still feeling like a home."

It's testimony to Murjani's vision and dedication that The Vanderbilt Estate now stands apart like a polished diamond in the heart of Phuket, an island known for grand villas but not one of this scale and sophistication.



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The Regency-style manor is set on 12 acres of manicured English gardens, lovingly designed by Mohan Murjani. The pool sits at the base of steps that lead to breathtaking views of the surroundings (right)

"There are many beautiful properties in the world, but nothing like this estate exists in Phuket," the 76-year-old points out.

Although just 10 minutes from the newly developed Boat Avenue that buzzes with the sounds of restaurants and shops, the five-bedroom villa is a tranquil oasis. A long, uphill driveway — at the turn of which one

"I love the lifestyle, ease of travel, weather, clean air and natural beauty in Thailand"





This cosy corner for chess, against floor-to-ceiling windows, looks out to the wrap-around terrace and the estate's vibrant garden (right). At the Vanderbilt Estate, priceless paintings collected over a lifetime greet visitors in the foyer. Murjani selected all the fabric upholstery and decided on how to place his art before choosing the furniture for the manor (below)

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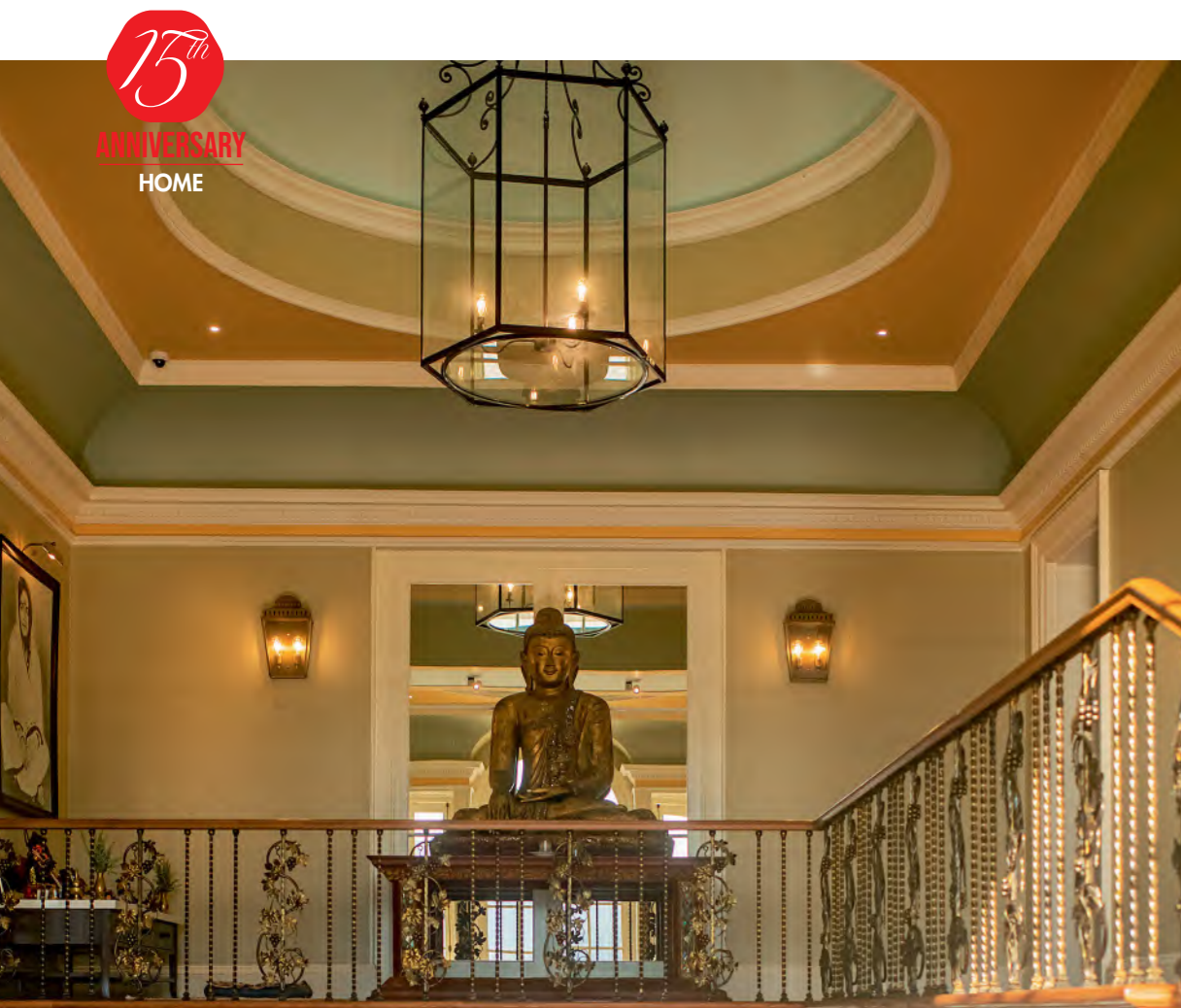
is greeted by a massive stone seated Buddha — leads into the property. Visitors are welcomed by a splendid fountain, behind which looms the beautiful house. It's only after entering the foyer, with its 30ft-high ceiling, flanked by a spiral staircase on one side and a wall dotted with mesmerising artwork on the other, that one realises the scale of the house.

Rooms lead out to acres of lush lawns, a box-hedged garden, a lake where one can go boating, and a swimming pool. Each room is designed to please the eye — from the cosy library and the living room, to the outdoor verandas and the game room, guest suites and the pièce de résistance master suite. Every corner of the villa evokes English grandeur, art and artefacts collected over a lifetime adorning the space.

It took Murjani seven years to bring his dream property to life, but anyone familiar with him knows only he could have undertaken such a complicated yet brilliant endeavour. After all, this is the man who put Indian entrepreneurs on the global map back in the 1970s, when he launched Gloria Vanderbilt, a brand of classic jeans named after the famous socialite



Murjani rests in the library, which boasts a fireplace and bay windows, filled with antiques and antiquarian books



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A stunning hand-carved Buddha, an ornate ceiling and artwork welcome guests at the grand entrance foyer, remarkable with a 30ft-high ceiling (left). The inviting sitting area in the master suite features symmetrical Regency-era windows, English curtains and a classic fireplace (above). Among the décor items in this marvellous home is a marble bust, a copy of the original Apollo Belvedere, circa 120 AD, as well as a pair of gold-patinated, cast-iron Greek lion lamp bases that are over 200 years old, from the Regency era of 1810-1820 (right)

who belonged to one of the richest families of America. The Vanderbilts were known for their famously lavish homes, which still command awe 150 years later. While Murjani owns the Vanderbilt brand globally, he sold the denim company (Gloria Vanderbilt recently signed Priyanka Chopra Jonas as its brand ambassador).

“I wanted to continue the Vanderbilt legacy, with which I’ve had a very close, personal connection for most of my life,” Murjani explains how he named his fabulous property, adding that he wanted to design something “that was worthy of the Vanderbilt name”.

After spending a good part of his life in Hong Kong, London, New York and India, Murjani, who has three children, fell in love with Thailand, its people and culture, and moved to Phuket.

“I love the lifestyle, the ease of travel, weather, clean air and natural beauty,” he says.

Yet, after spending time here, Murjani, who knows a thing or two about the good life, realised that Phuket had a dearth of properties that could cater to ultra-high-net-worth

individuals who need large spaces, privacy and security. While many villas on the island were lovely, he found that they lacked a large expanse of land and didn’t always have the requisite privacy from other abodes. He thought Phuket ought to have the ultimate luxury estate that someone could access — for a special event like a destination wedding or a vacation. For instance, if a celebrity wanted to visit Phuket, where would they stay and be free of prying paparazzi and unwanted attention? Think of the aforementioned Priyanka, or any movie star, or mega musicians like Beyoncé and Jay-Z! The Vanderbilt Estate was designed with such people in mind.

Murjani hunted for the ideal plot for five years, only to find the current property rather serendipitously. He recalls taking a wrong turn by a temple, when he had gone to see some estates in the area. When he continued down the road, he saw a little hill with a ‘for sale’ board, after which he called the number on the sign. The landowner flew to Phuket from Bangkok the next day and took Murjani on a tour of the hill.





The sitting room showcases arresting artwork, including 'Le Penseur', a Rodin bronze, a portrait of Vizier Murtaza Pasha by an artist from the court of Johann Ludwig, a set of South German water-colour works, and a Louis XXVI white marble clock (left and above). Among the art and antiques in the master bedroom is a 19th-century painting by Abbott Fuller Graves and a bronze head of a Roman emperor in marble. The fabrics were imported from various countries and custom-made in Thailand (below)



The fountain at the entrance of the English mansion was built to perfect proportion in classic Regency style. The wrap-around terrace, put together with salvaged antique teakwood and wrought-iron fencing, overlooks the verdant garden, completing the manor's look (below)



"We got to the top, and right away, I knew this was it," Murjani says with a smile. "I immediately felt like this was home. We went to Catch Beach Club to negotiate the price, and I bought the whole hill — all 13 acres of it! I had been told there's a powerful spirit on this land, and I had the privilege and honour of being the custodian of the property. There's an amazing feeling of well-being here. We later discovered that the land was filled with quartz and crystal. I didn't find the land — it summoned me."

Murjani has always loved English architecture from the late 18th and early 19th century, the Georgian. To design his dream home, he turned to his old friend and English architect, Robin Samuel, who had brought to life the Murjani home in London.

"Robin has incredible expertise and in-depth knowledge of authentic Georgian architecture and its numerous details. He's curious, creative and collaborative," Murjani says, comparing the two of them working on the project to how music composers develop a song — a constant to and fro.

They went through two completed designs before finally creating a third and final set of plans. The goal



**"I knew I had to have big gardens!
That was my starting point!"**



Murjani with his beloved Golden Retriever Sam and Poodle-Shitzu mix Pepsi, in the well-manicured lawns of the Vanderbilt Estate

was to put together a perfect English garden and English manor house.

"I knew I had to have big gardens! That was my starting point."

Next came the hardest part: the execution. In a country where tropical-style homes were the norm, it was quite the challenge to build an authentic Georgian estate in Phuket!

"It was like asking highly experienced Georgian builders in the UK to build an authentic and traditional Thai house!" Murjani says with a chuckle.

The contractor and his team were briefed to ensure that the house appeared ancient, like it had stood on the land for a century, despite being new!

"They had never done something like this before

and couldn't quite fathom how to make it look old and new at the same time," he says.

Every fabric, paint, wood finishing and decorative piece in the estate reflects Murjani's taste. The dining room boasts salvaged teakwood and 18th-century hand-painted wallpaper. In fact, Murjani installed the wallpaper himself, importing special chemical-free lining paper and adhesive to protect it against tropical weather and bugs.

And given his emphasis on the gardens, it's unsurprising that the selection of plants took five years. It was also because the team had to figure out the kind of flowers that would thrive in Phuket's weather. Murjani scoured northern Thailand to find suitable flora, bringing them back to the island to see if they would grow and flower.

When asked about his favourite room, he demurs. "I put so much love and passion into each room. Each holds a different meaning, just like your children. You love every child don't you? It's like having six children. How could I choose?"

Indeed, The Vanderbilt Estate is the ultimate labour of love, a luxury property catering to a discerning audience that seeks beauty, comfort, privacy and serenity, the perfect spot for a destination wedding but also brilliant for an intimate, romantic dinner. Thanks to Mohan Murjani, Asia has a glamorous and strikingly exquisite new estate, ready to cater to all your needs. 🏡

INTERVIEW: GAYATRI RANGACHARI SHAH