

# VOGUEliving

CASA, TASTE, TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE

EDITED BY MEGHA MAHINDRU

LA DOLCE VITA

## A PLACE IN THE SUN

A few hours from Chennai, in a little-known village, writers TISHANI DOSHI and CARLO PIZZATI have set up a place called home. Unhurried, unconnected and introspective, it's the only way they will have it, finds MEGHA MAHINDRU

"FOR US, THE CONCEPT OF WEEKENDS IS ALL COLLAPSED. WE WORK EVERY DAY, BUT I LIKE THAT SOMETIMES WE CAN SKIP WORK TO SWIM IN THE BEACH"

—TISHANI DOSHI

"Look for the bright blue gate on the left" is the only description that writer Tishani Doshi offers by way of direction to the home she shares with her Italian husband, writer Carlo Pizzati.

There are no neighbours and no postal address, but the blue gate, past a lagoon, off the picturesque East Coast Road outside Chennai, is so rare, it's hard to miss it. Inside, a sea of wild Casuarina surrounds the three-acre property that houses the champagne-pink facade. Aptly titled *Ar Lan y Môr*, Welsh for 'beside the sea', their home is poised amidst dense foliage on one side and a near-private beach on the other.

It's a balmy Monday afternoon when we meet, though it could easily have been a Sunday. "For us, the concept >

Designed by architect Benny Kuriakose, their home contrasts a steep sloping Kerala roof with Mediterranean blue windows

Photographed by ADIL HASAN





With no takeaway options nearby, Pizzati takes on lunch duties, while one-pot chef Doshi rustles up risotto and stir-fries for dinner

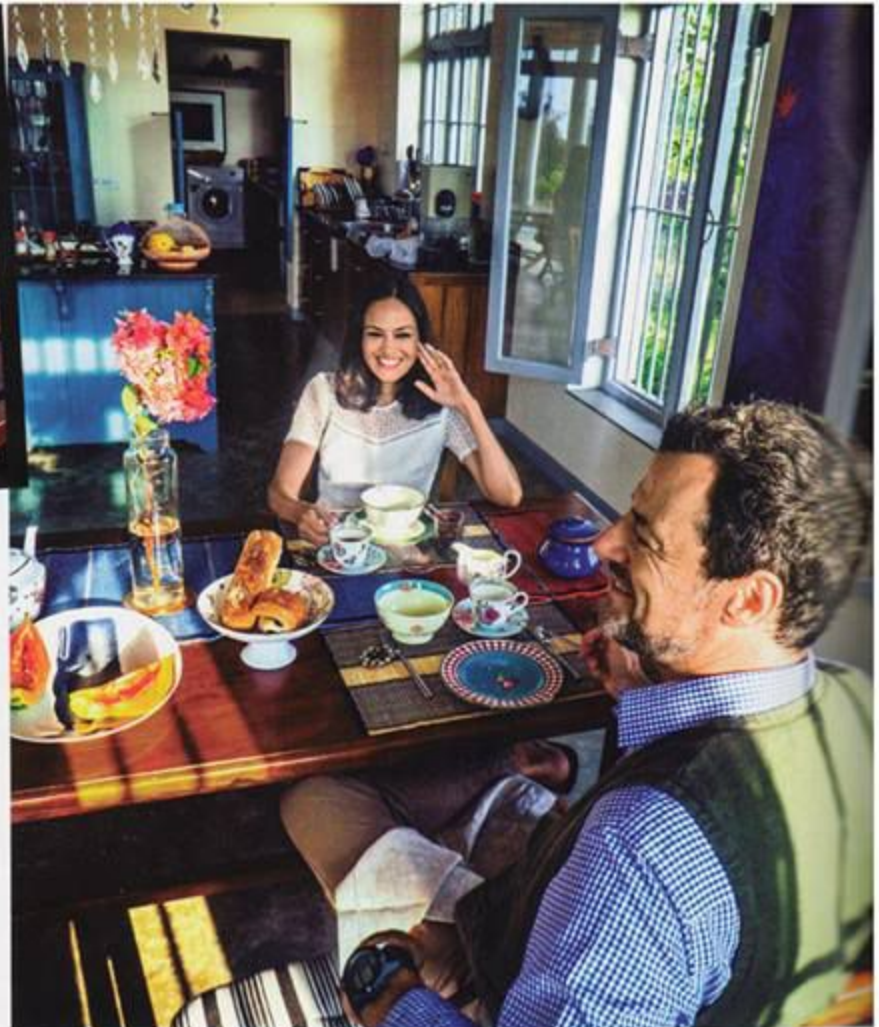
of weekends is all collapsed. We work every day, but I like that sometimes we can skip work to swim in the beach," says Doshi. The couple, dressed in breezy shirts and shorts, are ready for their post-lunch stroll by the shore. As we walk, with their three dogs (Buggy, Bagheera and Zelda Fitzgerald) for company, the two can't help but show off the landscape with almost proprietary pride. It's easy to see why—the topography never bores.

## THE GREAT ESCAPE

In 2014, prompted by their desire to escape the restlessness of city life, Carlos, a portmanteau given to them by friends, decided to settle in this sea-side haven nestled between two fishing villages. Their self-imposed urban exile has yielded many things that most cities can't—clean air, a sense of space and a life occasionally filled with the luxury of nothingness. "It's fantastic to stay here and read or actually do nothing and enjoy an hour of silence," says Pizzati. Between heavy spells of writing, relaxed cooking and days spent playing bocce ball or boogie boarding, their reward has been the extravagance of a slow-paced experience of time. "Everything here stands out more because of all the silence around. Silence is the solution for me. All the impediments that constantly distract you in the city are not here, so you can concentrate on writing," adds Pizzati.

## TWO'S COMPANY

Born to a Welsh mother and Gujarati father, Doshi first met Pizzati in her hometown, Chennai. "By the time we met again, two years later in Rome, she had completely erased that memory," says Pizzati. A series of coincidences brought them together again



and again. "Let's just say it took time," adds Doshi. But like a writer's true labour, it all ended in a magnificent story. "I gave her a ring on a helicopter over Sri Lanka and popped champagne....," recalls Pizzati. From our al fresco setting, they point to the lawns where they got married with over 100 friends in attendance. Of course during the four days of festivities, bouts of Pavarotti's 'O sole mio' were a given.

In spite of their nine-year gap, the two have a lot in common. Both have juggled a dizzying roster of identities and careers—Doshi, a writer, poet and freelance journalist, is also an "accidental dancer" who trained under dancer Chandralekha. Pizzati, an award-winning foreign correspondent for Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, has published non-fiction and fiction works and is working on his first collection of English short stories, even as he packs in lectures at Asian College of Journalism.

As multi-hyphenate citizens of the



The open bathroom offers an uninterrupted view of the sea

world, the two have also led peripatetic lives—Pizzati from his native Valdagno went to work across Europe, America and South America; and Doshi, after growing up in Chennai, went to the US and UK, before they signed up for this bucolic adventure. "We first tried to live together in Venice, but I didn't work well there," says Doshi. They decided to keep this beach house as base,



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—CARLO PIZZATI



Buggy and Pasty love to enjoy a leisurely stroll on the beach

VOGUE

A slower pace of life ensures that time stretches here



even as they continue travelling and attending book festivals across the world. After beginning 2017 in Jaipur, the duo plan to get a small cottage in Kodaikanal this month to write, and then, in May, Doshi heads to Norway for another literary festival. "I like that travel offers you the experience to be outside of yourselves... it extends our imagination and allows us to go beyond our boundaries," says Doshi. "It's also a way of understanding home."

## WRITE DIRECTION

While their life is designed around a shared vocation as writers, the duo maintain designated and separate rooms for writing, where they spend entire afternoons. "I think you need to be alone to write," says Doshi. They may not suffer pressing deadlines or dreary office commute, but their life has a routine—waking up early, writing, reading, walking dogs and cooking.

Between chasing butterflies and impulsive full-moon night picnics by the beach, their days seem marinated with Wordsworthian clichés, but living the



reclusive writer's life is not easy. "Writing here has a lot to do with discipline. It's relaxing to see the sea but it's also a distraction," says Pizzati.

With two for company, they may have fewer splashier night-outs but their home occasionally turns into something of a creative retreat and witnesses an influx of friends, fellow writers and artists. "Writers who come here start to read and work. It's a place where they can finally catch up with their thoughts," says Doshi. (Past visitors have included author William Dalrymple.)

Their closest friends, like their nearest supply of cheese, are in Auroville, over an hour's drive away. Otherwise, a dodgy 3G connection and a veiled Ecosport in the garage are their only link to the outside world. But as itinerant beings, they have learnt to adapt to the place they inhabit—so in cities Carloschi give in to "the urban excitement of sushi bars and multiplexes." When slowness pervades, they punctuate life by visiting their Chennai home. "When we start hearing our dogs talk back to us, we know it's time to head to the city," jokes Pizzati.

Staying in what most people call a "vacation home" has changed Doshi's relationship with nature. "The sea is part of the narrative here," she adds. "Urban India has already taken over storytelling; all the great Indian novels are set in cities like Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. So in a way, my life and writing is to resist that, and to offer a different narrative of the country," says Doshi. No wonder, her next novel is "informed" by her immediate environment. "It's about a woman who lives here with her sister. I can't imagine liv-



"We spend a lot of time together, so it's different from couples who go away to work. It's more intense," says Doshi of their relationship



ing here alone, but in the novel I can—that's the great thing about fiction. Whether in a city or elsewhere, I'm interested in what it means for a woman to live alone in this country."

Their time together, away from the humdrum of the city and its social compulsions, has also led them to pursue artistic ventures outside their writing. Occasionally, Pizzati uses his directing chops to shoot video poems of Doshi "for fun". In 2015, the two collaborated on *Dolce Marcescenza*, a collection of poems by Doshi that Pizzati translated to Italian. "It was a really slow, beautiful work because we both love language and like to explore the nuances and meaning of words," he adds.

Embracing their rural experience, they have managed to turn the modest into beautiful. The electricity supply may be unreliable here, but blackouts seamlessly turn into candlelit suppers with a romantic ritual of a "post-dinner dance", which, Pizzati jokes, is "very good for your digestion."

They continue to call this home "a work in progress", with future plans comprising buying more furniture and art, growing more fruits and vegetables, building a pool and perhaps even a dance studio. "I like the mixture of nature and that feeling of a horizon—that's where I work best... I like seeing the seasons change gradually and I find walking very meditative. It's all part of my writing process," adds Doshi. ■