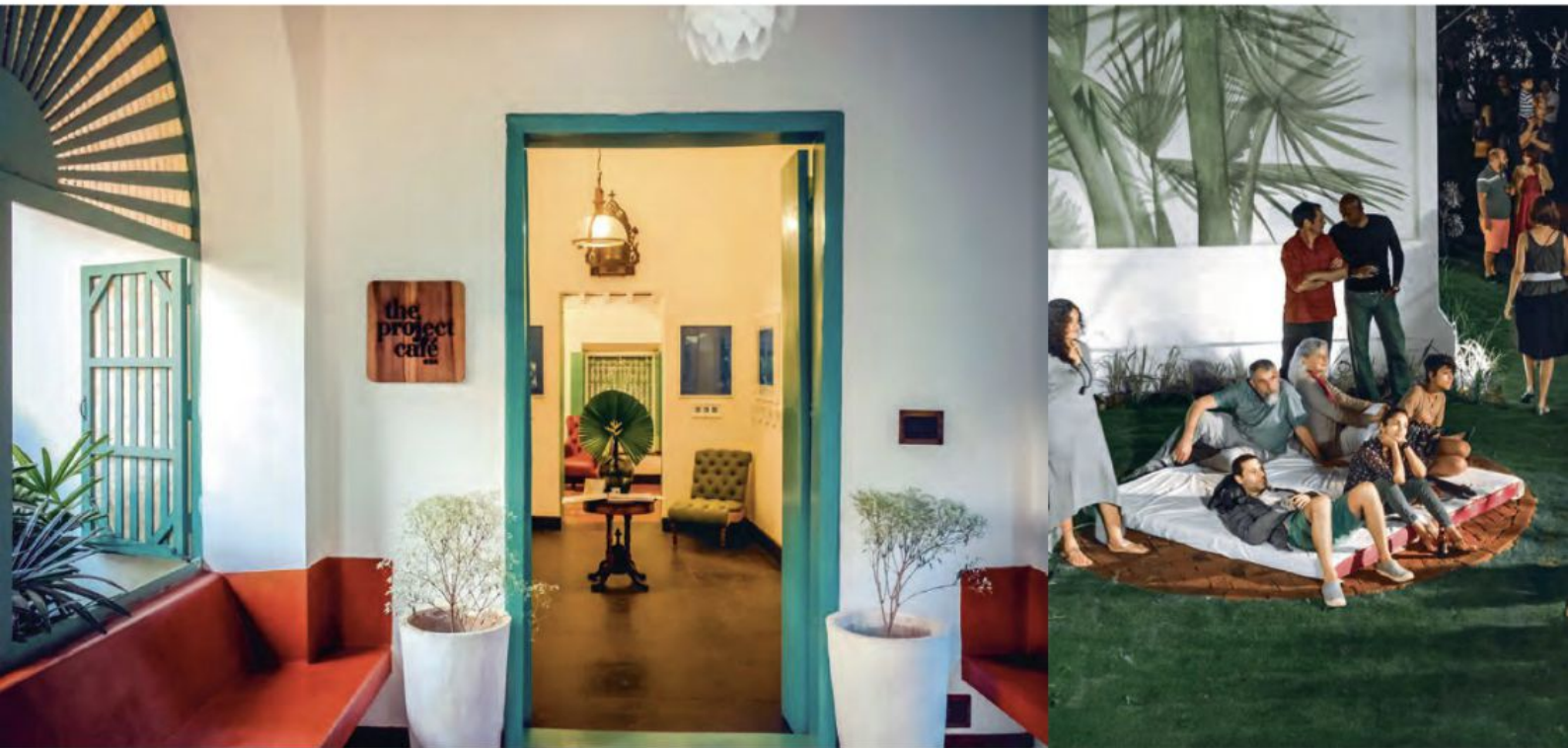


HOME IS WHERE THE

Art IS



THE PROJECT CAFÉ IN GOA IS A HERITAGE HOTEL, AN ART GALLERY AND AN EXHIBITION SPACE. THE REAL SURPRISE? MOST OF WHAT YOU SEE IS FOR SALE

Discover the bismarckia tree in the late afternoon, on the first day of my short stay at Amalia Villa, a 130-year-old Portuguese home in the heart of Assagao in North Goa. After a languid lunch of fresh red snapper and heavenly pineapple *serradura*, the Portuguese whipped cream dessert, I step outside on to the red stone *balcão* (a typical Goan balcony or verandah) for some fresh air. Standing before me is an unusual palm with pleated leaves that fan out as though abloom. Faded jade, like the colour of the sleeping sea on a gloomy day. I soon realise this shade of teal is liberally sprinkled across the 13,000-square-foot property that is spread over three houses. From painted wooden doors to the shell windows studded with mother-of-pearl, the cohesive, minimal palette of stark whites and sea greens suffuses all in its airy lightness.

Amalia, which sits in a quiet lane dotted with similar traditional homes, largely retains the flavour and essence of its original design—high ceilings, sloping roofs topped with Mangalore tiles and of course the *balcões*, a trademark of Goan Portuguese architecture. With these come bits of inherited history too: framed portraits of Amalia's previous owners still adorn the walls at the reception, and I learn that the bismarckia was most likely a souvenir brought back by the erstwhile family from their travels to Madagascar, where this nobilis variety belongs. Now refurbished into an experiential design project and multidisciplinary space, the villa opened its doors to the

public as The Project Café (TPC) Goa in December 2017.

Following in the footsteps of its precursor in Ahmedabad, TPC is a first-of-its-kind venture that lets guests experience art, retail, food and literature, all under one roof. Drasty Shah, co-founder of the project, describes it best as a “functional museum,” one where “everyone is putting in their signatures.” Collaborating with over 40 Indian and international artists and designers, the idea here is to build not just a collection of things, but one which “you can use and which is dynamic.” So it comes as no surprise when I learn that everything from my favourite wooden table at the restaurant-café and bar, Bismarckia, to the antique four-poster bed in my room is up for sale. And if I do plan on buying anything, including eclectic products by brands like Runaway Bicycle, The Burlap People and Bombay Perfumery in the retail area, I need to make it quick, as they might not be here for long. Three months down, I'm likely to find products by a new set of designers and artists. The same applies to each of the villa's six rooms that will undergo a complete makeover in a year. Creations by designers and architects such as Pulin Shah, Neeta Kumar, Hiren Patel and Anuj Sharma, which blend modern amenities with vintage sensibility, will be succeeded by new ones. To me, the thought of this ever-changing continuum within the expanse of an age-old home is exciting and intriguing, for it challenges the idea of permanence and time itself.



There is no dearth of space at The Project Café, whether one wants to curl up with a book from the permanent library by Roli Books (right), enjoy an open-air performance on the lawn under the night sky (middle) or some quiet time in the morning on the *balcão* at the entrance (left).

PHOTO COURTESY:
THE PROJECT CAFÉ

BY TEJAL PANDEY



TPC offers a carefully curated experience to its guests, be it through the art on display, like Dayanita Singh's Museum Bhavan (left), the eclectic decor store, Gulmohar Lane (right), or the lip-smacking food on offer, like the ratatouille with goat crème fraîche (bottom).

It's only fitting then that the space should play host to photographer Dayanita Singh's launch and exhibition of her latest work, Museum Bhavan or Pocket Museum, which explores the idea of photographs as mobile museums, and concepts of time and space. The outdoor area of Bismarckia has smoothly transformed into an event space for the evening and eventually an art gallery where Singh's works are on display. As the evening progresses, the lawns outside turn into an open-air concert ground to host a fado performance (a Portuguese genre of music known for its soulful songs) by a *fadista* of Goan origin, Sonia Shirsat. Guests lounge on mattresses laid out under the night sky. I score a spot on a cool *balcão* ledge instead, from where I enjoy both Shirsat's lilting voice and bits of a beautiful, private conversation about an intense *fado* performance the guest attended years back, in a tiny Lisbon pub. Sitting on the ledge, this space, which is so many things at once, feels like an old home at heart. One where you inadvertently find your own solo corner, your reading nook, and your own rhythm.

I've also worked out my morning spot—a quiet corner table at the restaurant, which has become my ad-hoc work-station. From here I enjoy the golden light pouring in, the gently billowing curtains and bits of the green outside visible through their creamy translucence, welcoming the outdoors within. I chat with the staff that sets up the space for the day, bringing in my breakfast of eggs and coffee. Residents of Assagao are warm and easy to talk to—one ends up inviting me to her family's snack shop up the road, another updates me on a family-run hotel close by that I'd stayed at many moons ago.

I jump at an opportunity to partake in a heritage tour of the village one evening, which the staff arranges on request. Born and bred in the neighbourhood, Felly Gomez, my tour guide, turns out to be a walking encyclopedia on Assagao and a ball

of infectious energy. His love for Assagao is apparent in the pride with which he shows me the bounty of mango, chickoo, cashew and tamarind trees as we go along. He brings alive the quaintness of the village with a trip to the local bakery, the bar (unfortunately shut at the moment) and a snack shop from his school days. He also makes quick trips to the oldest churches and institutes of importance. However, Gomez's enthusiasm while sharing Goan folklore is tinged with concern. He feels helpless as ancient trees are cut to clear up space, and newer constructions deplete scarce resources like the water reservoirs or *vaons* that run through Assagao, clogging them with rubbish. In an endearing gesture, right before we head back he turns to the community graveyard, and voices his protest in Konkani, pleading to the spirits of the village's ancestors to come to rescue, to intervene and restore balance.

Back at TPC, the feeling of community is all-pervasive, even as curious neighbours stroll in through the day, to perhaps check out the newbie on the block or to take measure of the extent of changes made to the home. Tourists looking for a bite to eat or a place to stay end up interacting with the space and the art, while those who come for the art end up checking out the food on offer. Akin to an open house, TPC, the "new neighbourhood landmark," as a guest labelled it, truly lives up to its multipurpose persona, as a one-point stop to collaborate for work, to ideate or just feel at home. ■



Essentials

The Project Café at Assagao lies 17 km/35 min northwest of Panjim. It is a 42 km/1.15 hr drive from Dabolim airport and 13 km/25 min from Thivim railway station. While some events at the villa are free for all, others are ticketed or by invitation only (theprojectcafe.in; doubles from ₹6,500; heritage tour from ₹1,000 per person).