



## VJ HOME

Design triumphs in India.

by **Judy Ross**

Jodhpur, located in the desert state of Rajasthan in India, is a dry, dusty town with a massive red sandstone fort looming above the typically chaotic streets below. Many of the houses are a brilliant cobalt blue, which has given the town the moniker “the Blue City”. Throughout the twisting market lanes are an extensive array of spices, and beautiful silky shawls and saris—yet these offerings seem unlikely to attract the international architects, designers, and decorators here on business. What they’re after lies behind closed doors of ordinary-looking warehouses that are home to an incredible array of textiles, ironworks, refurbished antiques, custom-made furniture, and folk art. In some of these dusty old buildings, salvaged treasures from former royal homes are piled to the ceiling, waiting to be restored. Serious shopping takes place here.

Much of Jodhpur’s ascent into a buyer’s destination for home decor is due to a Canadian, Cathy Nieddu, originally from Montreal, and her Italian husband, Roberto. She first came to Jodhpur as a buyer for La Cache, a Canadian women’s apparel chain that also featured Indian textiles. When she decided to open her own business and join forces (personally and professionally) with Roberto, they both designed and produced ironware for the export market. Today, their product line has grown to include wooden and upholstered furniture, lighting fixtures, stonework, and textiles. They live and work in the beautifully restored Sukh Sagar Haveli, a former chief minister’s property that they spent years rescuing from a state of disrepair.

After almost 20 years of living in Rajasthan, the Nieddus have developed a widespread reputation for their inventiveness as designers, to the extent that they were hired to help design actress Elizabeth Hurley’s wedding pavilion when she married Indian impresario Arun Nayar. The couple believe that they couldn’t have created their home design company, VJ Home, anywhere else. “Everything is possible in India, and you can get absolutely anything made,” says Cathy, sitting in the walled garden of their *haveli* (private mansion). “That’s because

skilled craftspeople still exist here, and the trades, like stone carving, are passed from father to son.”

With its mihrab-style windows and intricate carved-sandstone façade, the couple’s 19th-century *haveli* is part office space for their VJ Home business, part showcase for their product line, and part entertainment centre for the visiting parade of buyers and designers. There are guest suites separate from the building, as well as restored stables where Cathy and Roberto live with their eight-year-old daughter, Bianca, and posse of dogs.

“We made just about everything in here,” says Cathy as she walks around the two-storey open space of the *haveli*, pointing out the stunning mirrored sconces and chandeliers designed by Roberto. “We wanted the lighting to fit the heritage quality of the building but have a contemporary edge.” The bar stools, which he also designed, are covered in a hand-sewn patchwork of vintage blankets, and the chairs feature silk cushions made from old dress material decorated with tiny mica mirrors. One beautiful piece is a rosewood daybed with an intricate *jali* design that echoes the *purdah* screens used to hide women from view in the days of the maharajas. The bed is draped in filmy cotton voile and is so popular that they “send cargo loads of them to California.”

As demand increased for their line of home products, they started a sideline offering personalized buying trips. Clients who travel to Jodhpur not only have access to warehouses full of merchandise, but they can also get almost anything custom made. Every purchase is packaged, crated, and delivered anywhere in the world. As Cathy explains, “You can get everything for your house here—Indian slate, salvaged teak planks for the floor, carpets, fabrics, and stonework. And even with shipping charges, it’s still a bargain.”

Cathy’s flair for colour is instantly obvious in her retail shop, Via Jodhpur, on the outskirts of town. She carries a range of vintage and new textiles, intricately decorated tribal coats, embroidered leather slippers called *jutis* with curving toes, hand-blocked cotton tablecloths, and 80-year-old wedding shawls that can be used as table runners. She has cotton bedcovers specially woven in the state of Bihar and designs silk cushions from patches of old fabric that she finds in the desert villages between India and Pakistan.

The success of this design operation in an outpost of Rajasthan may seem incongruous, but it has, in fact, a historic precedence. At one time, camel caravans transported spices and gems across the desert, and Jodhpur was at the heart of the trading route. Today, thanks to the talents and energy of Cathy and Roberto Nieddu, it is once again a centre for trading and export, albeit with a contemporary twist. ❧



FROM LEFT: VJ Home’s Sukh Sagar Haveli including living area (above) with balconies carved from Jodhpur red sandstone and recycled Burmese teak flooring, and bar area (right).