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**Sans frills, the Bhardwaj bungalow
in Vadodara makes its layout the
backbone of its design.**

Tree Houses in Wildlife Paradise

Dean D'Cruz of Goa-based Mozaic Architecture has designed experiential stilted tree homes at Pugdundee Safari's The Pench Tree Lodge.

TEXT BY AMITA SARWAL
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY PUGDUNDEE SAFARIS



The treehouse rooms are built on stilts under a jungle canopy.



View from the tree-house deck overlooking the jungle.



Upper deck lounge of the main building. The floors and roof rest on raw Mahua tree trunks.

Tree houses first came into our young lives through fantasy stories woven in classics like *The Swiss Family Robinson* and *Peter Pan*.

The origin of these abodes can be traced back to the South Pacific and Southeast Asia regions, where early dwellers lived in tree homes for security against wild animals. Taking the cue from these, The Pench Tree Lodge offers stilted tree holiday homes which have become cool and happening!

Set in 16 hectares of woodland studded with Mahua



Evening view of the main building. An old water tower has been converted innovatively into dining & lounge areas, helping reduce building footprints.



The bedroom of the treehouse, which is completely wooden, is made from trees harvested from the forest department.



The generous bathroom of the tree house.



trees on the edge of the Pench village in proximity of the Pench National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh, the resort offers stilted tree houses and riverside cottages in a natural forest environment with contemporary facilities and comfort.

The Pench Tree Lodge has undergone renovation recently.

During this, the existing shells of a few wooden tree structures were upgraded, and a new central facility as well as six new cottages which get fronted by a seasonal rivulet, were added to the premises.

Explaining the additional dwellings, the architect Dean D'Cruz explains, 'The

stunning natural beauty of the site was something that needed to be captured by the units while the building itself needed to blend into the natural surroundings. The real purpose of the lodges is to create a nature-based experience with all the comforts of a home and thus the interface of the built and

One of the cottages which overlooks the jungle with a seasonal rivulet flowing past.



Cottage showing stone-walled bedroom on the mezzanine level.



Lower informal seating in the main building.

natural needs to be as seamless as possible.'

The six treehouses, constructed around, next to, or among the trunk or branches of one or more mature trees are completed with dark wood panelling, and equipped with contemporary brass bedsteads and colourful tribal fabrics, open on to balconies shaded by the leafy Mahua trees.

Except for the roofing which is insulated metal sheeting, most materials of wood and stone were locally sourced. The artefacts and art work were also as local as possible. There is an understated luxury, yet simplicity in the design which is essential for any hospitality project, but everywhere nature rules and determines the architecture.

The 'Dean' of Mozaic Architecture

A 1983 graduate from Sir J J College of Architecture, Mumbai, stumbled into architecture after studying two years of pure science at Elphinstone College. 'Realising I was heading towards a dead end, I searched for a profession that would have creativity integrated in it,' recalls Dean D'Cruz, Creative Head of Mozaic Architecture, Goa.

'The JJ years, with its campus in the heart of old Bombay, allowed me to explore the architecture and arts of this wonderful city. We had opportunities to listen to speakers like J Krishnamurthy on our campus lawns and see the early works of young artists who are now international stalwarts in the field. The architectural college itself did not offer much but thankfully allowed the space for us to explore the world outside and discover ourselves,' the 59-year old adds.

During an internship at Architects Combine, Mumbai, a small firm with creative and highly principled partners, the ethics experienced there served as a template in D'Cruz's own practice.

'After graduating, I chanced upon the book Design for the Real World by Victor Papanek and discovered my calling for product design. I applied to Ohio State where Victor was teaching at that time. In the interim I went down to Goa to assist Ar Gerard Da Cunha. The easy paced life of Goa and the softness of the Baker style architecture that Gerard practiced made me put aside the dream of doing a Masters



The pavilion style dining hall and pantry showing the passive cooling system above.

in Design and follow an earthy lifestyle in Goa. It has been 35 years here and this unique location of a mix of rural and urban, of cultures and of landscapes from seas to mountains had a lot of learnings,' details D'Cruz.

'In my college days I showed a great enthusiasm for technology but working with Gerard made me understand the need for a more humane and down-to-earth approach. Our partnership firm Natural Architecture, formed in 1987, worked with waste building materials and innovative designs, built over 50 houses in its span of seven years. Having to act as both architect and contractor gave a tremendous understanding



Fresh produce from farm to table.



Dean D'Cruz, Creative Head, Mozaic Architecture

FACT FILE

Typology
 Resort

Project
 The Pench Tree Lodge

Location
 Pench, Madhya Pradesh

Client
 Pugdundee Safaris

Completion
 2017

Area
 16 hectares

Architectural firm
 Mozaic Architecture

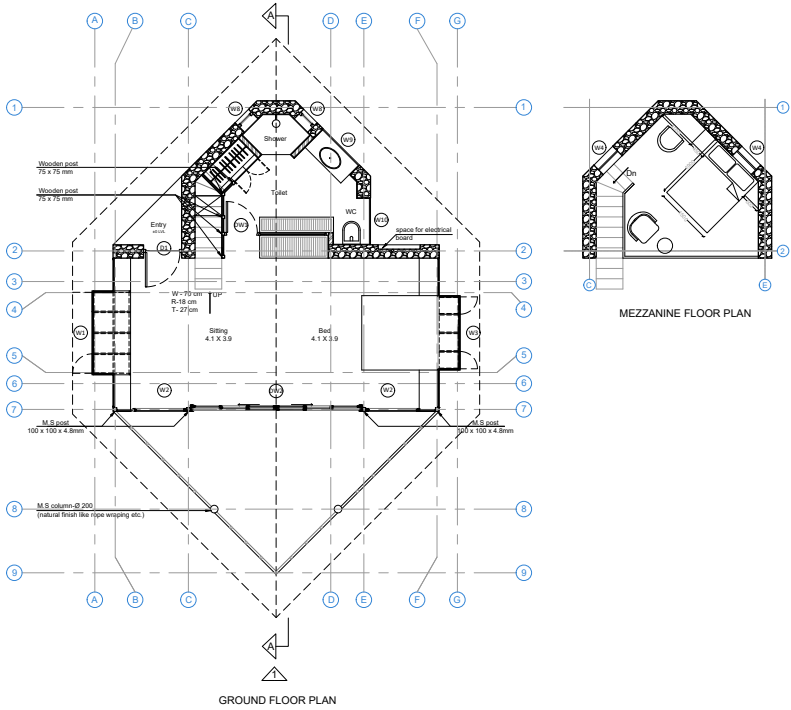
Architectural team
 Dean D'Cruz & Amit Kamal

Interior Design
 Bhavna Bhatnagar
 (An Indian Summer) & Manav Khanduja
 (Pugdundee Safaris) Team

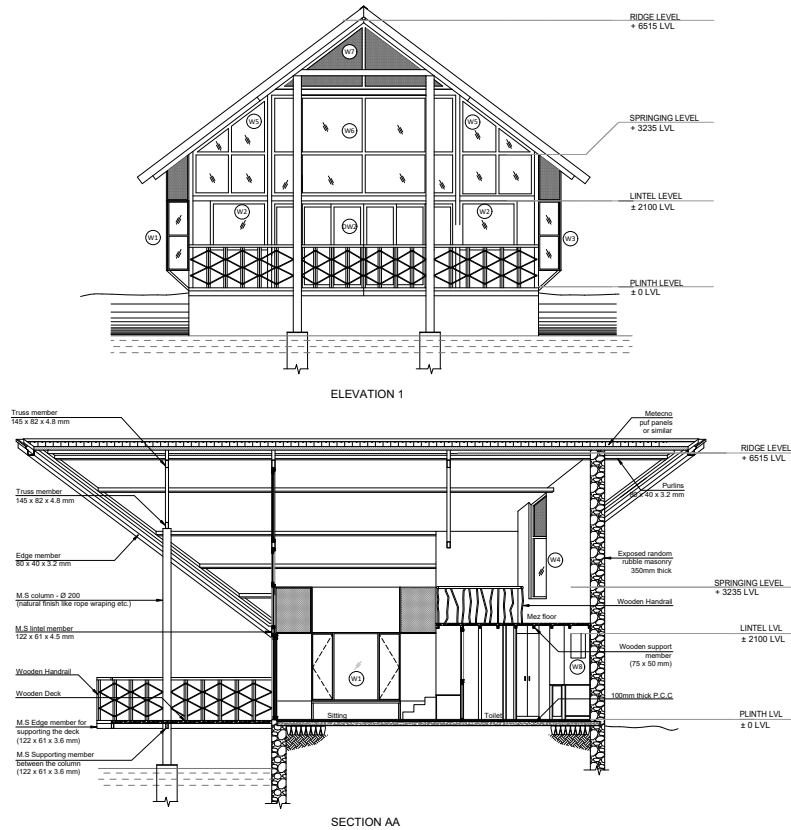
Structural Engineer
 Yogesh Bhohe & Sebastiao Falcao

Contractor
 Vikesh Agrawal

Furniture & lighting
 In-built & sourced



Plans and sections of the rivulet facing cottages.



resort

of the properties of materials, limitations and potential of labour and the intricacies of costs. This foundation served well, helping me move into other states and geographies using new materials and differently skilled labour in other varied climates,' describes the architect.

In 1994 he set up Dean D'Cruz & Associates and as principal architect, expanded the base of design work, taking on small hotels, large houses and institutional work. In 2001 he co-founded Mozaic Architecture, with general collaboration between disciplines as the core ethic.

'Mozaic grew to a firm of about 50 people and has now downsized to about 15 in architecture and eight in product design. The larger one grows as a firm, one has the issue of standardisation and the role of architects moving towards accountability. Small firms, though difficult to get large projects, have agility that allows them to experiment and push the boundaries at times. Critical to any project of course is an understanding client and we have over the years learned to do an early assessment, avoiding the loud and aggressive ones,' reasons the company's Creative Head.

Speaking of his design philosophy, D'Cruz elaborates, 'I have never really had a single master or style inspiring our projects. The early college phase had people like Mies with a pure structural and spatial grammar; while working with Gerard, Gaudi was a big influence. In today's fast changing architecture and iconism we have a very form-



Holistic wildlife experiences with in-house naturalists.



Alfresco meal during a jeep safari.

based architecture hitting us, but there are some examples that evolve from very direct needs and getting past the gloss provides some interesting directions that may influence us. Our design philosophy however remains one that is driven by the site, responding in a creative way to the client's brief with a practical choice of materials and form, with sustainability always in mind.'

After an initial 10 years, from 1998 when they won about one award a year, D'Cruz moved to 'being part of juries to bring about a deeper analysis of works across the country and an introspection of where the

architectural profession in India is moving'.

'A special experience has been while working on the Regional Plan 2021 for Goa. One changed scales from the individual plot that we are normally restricted to as architects to a whole state! It made me realise the impact buildings and settlements have on us and the environment. Not having a formal education in planning worked both ways in terms of having something new to learn and at the same time offering perspectives that came from an environmentalist background and a need for incorporating grassroot democracy,' he concludes. 