



personal space |

Living the high life

The home of Dalat native Le Ngoc Khanh Tam and her husband Barry Israel sits 1,500m above sea level, in a temperate climate that provides a respite from the tropical heat and humidity of lower lying areas. **By Tay Suan Chiang**

MENTION Vietnam and the likes of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City come to mind. But Dalat? The town located 300km north-east of Ho Chi Minh City sits 1,500m above sea level and is surrounded by pine forests.

Its temperate climate attracts those who are looking for a respite from the tropical heat and humidity of lower lying areas.

It is no wonder that Dalat native Le Ngoc Khanh Tam and her American lawyer husband, Barry Israel, have decided to make the highland town their home. The couple are also the developers of La Vallee de Dalat, a collection of seven luxurious single-family homes on a slope that overlooks miles of still-bucolic terrain and harks back to the glory days of Gallic design for inspiration.

They moved into their villa last year. "We chose this location because of its view, proximity to the city centre, which is five minutes away, and because the topography is ideally suited for a secure, high-end compound for those seeking a quiet and safe environment," says Ms Le Tam.

According to Ms Le Tam, Dalat has several nicknames, which are indicative of its climate and beauty. "Some call it the Garden City because the climate is ideal for growing flowers, which are exported around the world," says Ms Le Tam. "And

others call it the Honeymoon Capital because it is a romantic mountain destination."

And yet others call Dalat, La Petit Paris, as a result of the French architectural influence in the area. "Barry and I wanted to build villas that are consistent with the architectural heritage of Dalat," says Ms Le Tam. "We feel it is important to continue the tradition from an overall design perspective but with modern features one would expect from any high-end development."

Architecture firm Asiatique Design had to meet two goals, one of which was to design the villas to be consistent with the French colonial style. "We also told them we wanted the design of the houses to funnel the residents and their guests toward the spectacular mountain and valley views," says Ms Le Tam. The idea is to have interiors that will pull anyone in the house towards these views. To do this, the architects designed the side of the house facing the valley and mountains to have large verandas on each level, and large windows and sliding doors opening out to the views.

The couple's 600 square metre villa comes with a master suite, three guest bedrooms and a maid's room. The main floor has a great room that runs the width of the entire house with space for a large living room and dining area. The dining area opens through a large archway into the kitchen. In addition, there is an entertainment and playroom, and a smaller room, which the couple call their cigar room, designed to be a quiet place for relaxation or to enjoy a cigar.



FRENCH FLAIR

The couple's 600 square metre villa comes with a master suite, three guest bedrooms and a maid's room; (Anti-clockwise from right) the great room with variety of furniture, carpets and art; outside of villa; jacuzzi; kitchen area; cigar room with collection of autographed sports photos; stairwell. PHOTOS: FRED WISSINK



VIEW TO A THRILL

The luxurious villas sit on a slope that overlooks miles of still-bucolic terrain and harks back to the glory days of Gallic design for inspiration; (left) the deck off the master suite, the villa's highest outdoor spot; (far left) view of Dalat



'The mountain and sky views are constantly changing with the weather. We love sitting on one of the verandas for breakfast or late at night, just listening to the quiet and enjoying the ever-changing sky and mountain views.'

Ms Le Tam (above with husband Barry)

The interiors were designed by Mr Israel's daughter, Alison Legge, who works with design firm Pagoda House in Singapore. "I took Alison's overall colour scheme and themes and chose from a variety of furniture, carpets and art that Barry and I have collected over the years, and from designs that our lacquer furniture factory produces for high-end clients around the world," says Ms Le Tam. "Our taste is somewhat eclectic, a result of our travels and of Barry having represented clients from around the world."

Ms Le Tam cites examples of their collection of Oriental carpets that were mostly purchased in Singapore and India. The solid teak furniture in the master suite, the solid rosewood dining set and Mr Israel's office furniture were custom made in Chiang Mai. Much of the furniture was also custom-made by the couple's factory, Saigon Interiors, which produces high-end, lacquer-finished furniture and accessories for the world's top brands and retailers.

Art-wise, the couple have collected plenty over the years, including hand-carved wood sculptures from the Pacific islands, and Murano crystal pieces from Venice, and a personal favourite of theirs which is a house-and-water scene made entirely out of all parts of a coconut, done by a Thai artist. Mr Israel also collects oil and watercolour paintings from the United States and Europe including works by Salvador Dali and LeRoy Neiman.

"Our collection naturally includes a number of pieces by Vietnamese artists," says Ms Le Tam. "We are currently waiting for a new piece we commissioned by a young and upcoming artist, which is a pencil sketch copying a photo from the late 1920s, showing the Dalat Palace Hotel as it originally looked." The couple are former owners of the Dalat Palace Hotel and Dalat Palace Golf Course.

Apart from art, Mr Israel also has a collection of autographed sports photos of some of his heroes, including Mohammed Ali, Jackie Robinson and Sandy Koufax which he proudly displays in the cigar room.

The couple usually spends three or four days a week in Ho Chi Minh City and weekends from Wednesday or Thursday to Sunday in Dalat.

One of their favourite spots in the home is the deck off the master suite, which is the villa's highest outdoor spot. "We like to sit here before bedtime. It is an intimate and incredibly peaceful spot that helps us relax after a hectic day," says Ms Le Tam.

The other is their outdoor jacuzzi, which is a great place to relax at after their game of golf.

"This is the most fun house either of us has ever lived in," says Ms Le Tam, adding that the views make the house. "The mountain and sky views are constantly changing with the weather. We love sitting on one of the verandas for breakfast or late at night, just listening to the quiet and enjoying the ever-changing sky and mountain views."

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