

AD



The Alibag Issue

BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE DOING BEAUTIFUL THINGS
IN THE HAMPTONS OF MUMBAI



AD 100
THE MOST INFLUENTIAL
ARCHITECTS AND
INTERIOR DESIGNERS IN
THE SUBCONTINENT

KUNAL MANIAR landscape architect

Maniar's client list includes names like Mukesh and Nita Ambani, Shah Rukh and Gauri Khan, Ranbir Kapoor and Rani Mukerji to name a few. For this issue, Maniar gave us a tour of two impeccably designed gardens in 'Natural Habitat' (pg 338) and 'Richly Layered' (pg 344). "AD's creative team is great, and has visionary ideas. I congratulate Greg and the entire team for AD's 7th anniversary!"



SHWETA VEPA VYAS writer

This Mumbai-based journalist regularly contributes to leading luxury and lifestyle publications. On working on the portfolio 'AD x Jeevaram Suthar & Poonaram Suthar' (pg 243), she says, "This issue was a great opportunity to revisit Alibag after so many years, and discover this whole new artistic side to it. It's a beautifully-put-together issue and has been my favourite so far."



NEVILLE SUKHIA photographer

Sukhia is a Mumbai-based photographer, whose work includes adventure, portraiture, documentary and travel photography. For this issue, he enjoyed shooting a range of fabrics in Alibag's only historical fort in 'Tree Hugging' (pg 226). "I loved shooting in the ruins of the Revdanda fort. It showed a completely different side of Alibag."



GAURI KELKAR writer

A regular AD contributor, Gauri Kelkar finds writing to be a constant learning experience. Besides working on 'AD100' (pg 137), Kelkar visited Pinakin Patel's home in Alibag in 'This Is Home' (pg 312). "There is something remarkable about the home. It's a soulful house made with a lot of heart."

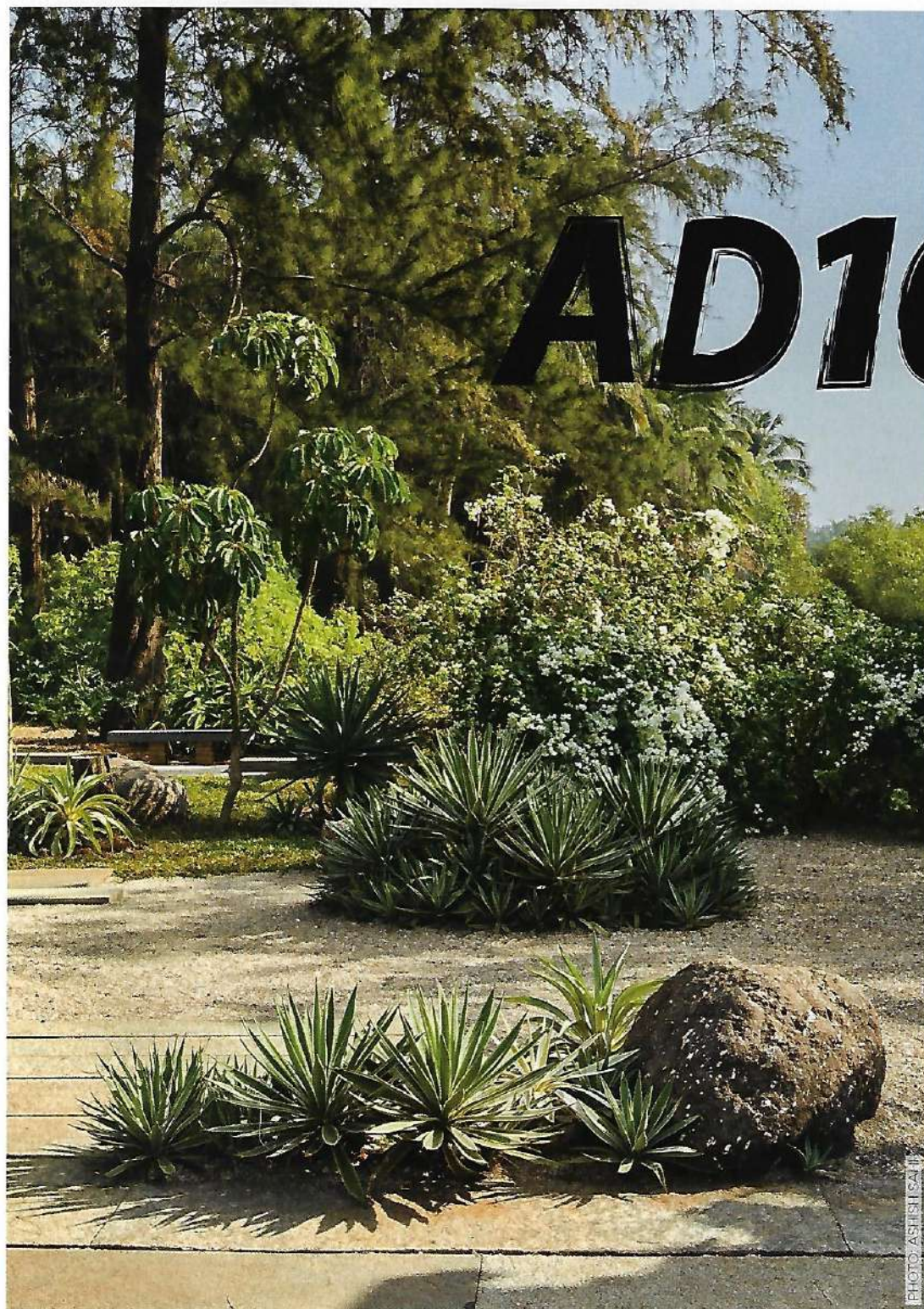


ANAMIKA BUTALIA writer

A former journalist with over 14 years of experience, Mumbai-based Anamika Butalia turned freelancer to travel the world. In 'Finally, Clarity' (pg 86), she writes about Ilse Crawford's latest glassware designs for J&L Lobmeyr. "The minimalist design—its sinuous shape and delicateness—makes the set covetable."



PHOTOS: ASHISH SAHI (KUNAL MANIAR, GAURI KELKAR)



**FEATURED ON
PAGE 338**

**KUNAL MANIAR &
ASSOCIATES**

Mumbai

Clients: Nita and Mukesh Ambani, Nawaz and Gautam Singhania, Praful Patel, Rohiqa and Cyrus Mistry, Katrina Kaif.

Collaborations: Farmers from the interiors of Maharashtra and Gujarat "to guide and promote the growth and propagation of indigenous plants that are native to their respective regions".

→ kunalmaniarassociates.com

PHOTO: ASHISH CAJI

DESIGN CONSULTANTS *Mumbai*

TAERA CHOWNA

Signature: Getting the details right—like the view of a garden from a bedroom window, or the colour combinations that work best in filtered light. **Words of Wisdom:** "For me, gardens should be evocative, sensory and gorgeous. It's very important that every vista of the garden is framed like a picture. In some ways, I feel like a painter composing what my client sees from every angle."

The infinity pool is integrated into the landscape in a cohesive design, its boundaries outlined only subtly.

NATURAL HABITAT

Mumbai-based landscape architect Kunal Maniar is behind some of Alibag's most spectacular gardens, including this seemingly natural private oasis, which surrounds a landmark contemporary house

WRITER RAJASHREE BALARAM • PHOTOGRAPHER ASHISH SAHI

An uneven hardscape of granite slabs creates an interesting pattern on the grassy terrain that is thoughtfully punctuated with sand. *Facing page:* Succulents and casuarinas dominate the garden. The reflection of the foliage on water is a carefully contrived design element that Maniar describes as fluid paintings.



The layered deck creates an optical illusion of a uniform level between the swimming pool and the sea. The island platform, which is paved with basalt chips, makes for an informal seating space with benches hewn from casuarina wood and cosy room for a bonfire.

I dislike gimmicks in landscapes, no matter how pretty they may seem," says Kunal Maniar. One of India's leading landscape architects, Maniar admits his skills come at a premium as much for what he can do to a patch of land as what he won't. We are standing in the middle of a 30,000-square-foot garden that he has designed around an extensive sea-facing villa in Alibag. Though there is more than enough room to go overboard with all kinds of garden exotica, Maniar has made it an unconventional story of minimalism, all nurtured over a span of two years. It helped that his design ethic was in sync with the clients'—Naivedya and Ananya Agarwal—pithy brief: "keep things natural and free-flowing".

"I have always been partial to landscaping that is organic, indigenous and natural. Plants arranged in strict geometry and symmetry don't excite me," he says. For Maniar, landscape design is not primarily about the spectacular possibilities of horticulture as it tends to be with many practitioners of the art. "Nature does not grow things in measured uniformity, does it? Instead, there is a beautiful symbiosis and integration of elements. I strive not to interfere with that grand design and find it thrilling to collaborate with it." The conspicuous absence of excessively manicured foliage around the property speaks volumes; there are no potted plants, carefully trimmed hedges or contained bunches of colourful blooms. Any subtle hints of colour are limited to the white bougainvillea vines that cascade over the retaining walls, and the trees of white frangipani planted towards the back garden.

As the swimming pool at the centre of the property, laid out on a layered deck, divides the landscape into two halves, the greatest challenge for Maniar was to conceive and execute an uninterrupted, cohesive design. Eventually, the answers he sought to resolve the problem emerged from the sea outside. "It struck me that everything in here just had to serve as an accent to that stunning view." He got the landscape elevated three metres, so the outdoors of the house sat on a perch that looked out at an unhindered view of the beach—and instead of a flat surface, the lawn is laid out in mounds and waves. He further aced his game with an unusual choice of hardscape. The boulders that were excavated when the property was being dug up were arranged in intimate gatherings on the lawns, where the family could sit together, chat and enjoy the view outside.

STONE WORK

Things didn't exactly get easier though when Maniar opted for granite slabs of different textures, shades and thicknesses to dress up the floors of the garden. "Back in the 1990s when I visited Milan, I

had seen a profusion of wonderful stone work around the Duomo, and it has remained a persistent memory and inspiration." There are over 600 granite slabs used in the garden (similar to the ones cladding the exterior of the house); each one was numbered like puzzle pieces of a barcode design, so contractors and workers could figure out the exact positioning unerringly. The juxtaposition of the various granite slabs was painstakingly worked out over several drafts on his laptop. The slabs are partially embedded in sand without any cement or mortar to hold them in place. Even the sand used has a generous mix of shells—whole and broken bits—so the garden seems like a natural derivative of the surrounding beach. "In the dry months, sand tends to fly around and becomes bothersome. The bits of shell add the necessary density to keep the particles in place, and also lend a subtle, unusual character to the area," says Maniar. Slivers of grass and sand are deliberately allowed to peek out through the spaces between the granite slabs: "That's because I like leaving room for nature to take over. And I also hate that demarcating line coming in between man-made design and nature's inimitable plan!"

Even tiny elements of drama around the property are worked in without screaming for attention—a swath of reddish river-washed pebbles, an island deck in the pool with benches in abstract design hewn out of old casuarina trunks lying in the garden area, and the lone showstopper of sorts—a *tadgola* (ice apple) palm transplanted from the neighbourhood. "Typically, the tree does not take too kindly to transplantation. So, we had to treat it with hormone shots and other medicinal interventions for a month so the roots could gain a stronghold." Maniar also planted several casuarinas around the property to create a loose semblance of a grove—not in neat rows but at angles from each other to lend depth and background. In fact, there are no more than eight varieties of plants, mostly xerophytes—cacti and succulents—that don't need much water to survive, and that have been tucked away so as not to abrade unsuspecting passers-by.

The back garden of the villa is in proximity to the master bedroom. Though it does not have a beach view, it is a secret niche filled with the fragrance of night jasmine and the sweet sounds of birds attracted by the berries of two stocky Singapore cherry trees. "People would typically want to hang around in the front garden. I wanted something here at the back that would pull people in without actually pointing to the place. So, we decided on a night jasmine shrub. Its nocturnal vibe also seems just right, planted under the bedroom window." In the hands of a less gifted artist, that could have been just another pretty, colourful flowering tree. The night jasmine is neither too pretty nor colourful, but it's pure poetry. Kunal Maniar wouldn't have it any other way. ♦



The driveway is flanked by dense foliage and subtly demarcated margins.

RICHLY LAYERED

In this second Kunal Mamiar-designed Alibag garden, the landscape architect fuses bursts of planting with antiques and installations

WRITER RAJASHREE BALARAM • PHOTOGRAPHER ASHISH SAHI
STYLIST SAMIR WADEKAR



A dining table made of brass is paired with granite benches in the outdoor dining area, surrounded by mango and mud-apple trees. A cascade of ferns arranged as massive chandeliers makes a dramatic statement in the backdrop. The floor around the dining area is scattered with brick and cinder chips that also serve to cool the space in the warmer months.

Reflections are critical to Kunal Maniar's design ethic. The tall coconut palms edging the pool appear like a serene painting in the blue waters.





Eight years ago, Kunal Maniar's sister asked him to buy her a Sabyasachi Mukherjee outfit for her wedding. "I had a rather vague idea about his work back then, and felt mildly irritated when she insisted on dragging me to his studio." Today, Maniar is glad he indulged his sibling, and credits that day at the studio for nudging him to focus on storytelling in landscape design. "I was fascinated by how Sabya's designs were filled with a mysterious mix of motifs and textures that revealed themselves in layers. I've got to say this garden is inspired by Sabyasachi Mukherjee."

Indeed, the 2.25-acre property in Kihim, north of Alibag, that Maniar is referring to is a richly layered tale, with the house sitting on the western tip, facing the sea, and the entry from the east pronounced by a 500-metre driveway in black gravel. "There is a lovely, crunchy sound that the gravel makes when you walk on it. You can hear your footsteps, and, rather subtly so, you are made more aware of your presence amid nature."

Maniar is obsessed with detail, going so far as to tell his assistants not to design, but to detail things well. "Any beautiful picture is a sum of the time you spend perfecting the details that go into it." It's obvious that his passion is aided by extraordinary clarity and the gumption to fight for his ideas. Fortunately, his strong convictions on design have won over clients who are just as exacting: Mukesh and Nita Ambani, Shah Rukh and Gauri Khan, Rani Mukerji, MS Dhoni, Katrina Kaif and Gautam Singhania, to name a few.

Landscape designing is a soulful experience, according to Maniar—one that is shaped by sounds, textures, colours and smells. "You need to design holistically while taking into consideration everything that the land has to offer. It's not just about horticulture, as people are so quick to assume." His key strength, he believes, is making room for studied negligence—the ability to consciously stand back and allow nature to assert its design statement freely. Maniar has used over 50 varieties of plants all over, including many fruit-bearing trees that had originated on the property. A large baubinia near the entrance gate is in full pink bloom, and also home to a noisy party of different birds.

50 SHADES OF GREEN

The colour code in the garden encompasses nearly every shade of green, gently interrupted at intervals by large cement urns adorned with red hand-cut tiles; boulders that, over time, have turned into receptacles and now hold water for birds; granite stone benches; and curious arrangements of unpolished granite slabs placed vertically. "I wanted to figure out a way in which I could explore verticality without always using tall trees," says Maniar.

The key highlight of the front garden, though, is the al fresco dining area, which is dominated by a massive table made of a single 12-foot-long sheet of brass. The table is more than a tasteful design element for Maniar; it's also a symbol of his unwavering

perseverance and conviction towards his design ideas: "Initially, the client was unsure about the design, so I commissioned one for my office conference room and showed her exactly what I had in mind." Maniar admits that he thrives on pushing the envelope every chance he gets. For instance, the black Balinese lamps suspended from the branches of a mango tree, looming above the dining table, would have been enough to pump up the aesthetics, but he also fashioned three large chandeliers from naturally cascading ferns. ["Landscape architects don't get to use fancy Lalique chandeliers outdoors, so we source our decor elements from nature."] The chandeliers are not grouped together in an obvious, showy arrangement at one spot but spread in a sequence that draws people into a circuitous path of discovery. "You need to walk around the area and find it. It is tucked away like a little secret."

The layering continues further with a step-up area where kids can lounge, while adults linger after lunch at the table. Even the seating arrangement has been worked out after a careful study of behavioural patterns: "The long bench on one side is for people who prefer to have a meal together with others and don't like moving around much once they are seated. For the seating on the other side of the table, I have split the granite slab into two benches, so it allows more free movement for those who like to get up in the middle of a meal as and when they wish to."

IN THE DETAILS

The hidden surprise in this intriguing subplot in the garden, is a gathering of colourful fish installations made from mild steel. One of them spouts water, on tap, into a large Burmese urn. "I was not keen on installing a ceramic washbasin in the garden," says Maniar, adding "so we came up with a solution that meshes utility and art." There are loads of such thoughtful interventions everywhere. For instance, as the client enjoys a betel leaf after lunch (it is traditionally used as a digestive), Maniar has planted a shrub close at hand, so she can pluck one whenever she wants.

The woody hush of the front garden gives way to a breezy back garden where the design elements are all about minimalism, to draw attention to the expansive view of the Arabian Sea. There is a profusion of coconut palms creating a screen of sorts on one side, juxtaposed against an unhindered, naked view of the sea on the other. The sprawling deck that spills out of the house in subtle layers is made from tiny hand-cut granite squares. "I could have simply ordered small Shahabad tiles, but the uneven edges you get with a manual cut adds a certain natural appeal." The decor elements in the back garden have been carefully chosen to weave a tale and not just to sit pretty: a large antique urn that was once used to mix batik dyes now holds a profusion of succulents; driftwood from old casuarina trees is showcased as an installation in one corner; a line-up of frangipani trees is angled by the wind; a pergola with a wooden boat is nailed to the ceiling, that serves as an overhead lighting fixture. Another boat in the garden holds seasonal flowers. For now, it's poinsettias. Says Maniar, "A burst of colour is all you need here in Alibag. The sea is enough." ♦