

A PASSAGE TO

INDIA

Having cut a stylish swath from Brussels to Bombay, the free-spirited designer and hotelier Loulou Van Damme has returned to her birthplace in the Palani Hills for her latest adventure.

BY MICHAEL SNYDER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON ROBERTS

SCENIC OVERLOOK
Loulou Van Damme
stands at the edge
of her hotel's
property in the
Palani Hills of
Tamil Nadu, India.



IT'S ONLY MID-FEBRUARY, but winter is already starting to retreat into the hills, leaving South India's fertile plains to bake under the pre-summer sun. After a year of weak rains, the landscape here in the Palani Hills — where the flat expanse of Tamil Nadu rises to the spice and tea estates of the lush Western Ghats — is dry.

Just above the coconut fields, Isla Van Damme (call her Loulou) walks onto the veranda of the home she's spent the last year building in this remote, largely unknown corner of India. She glances down at the table she's just finished setting — the colonnade of candles, the offhand flourish of bougainvillea set out for her first dinner party in the new house — then up at the sky. "There aren't going to be many stars tonight, but you never know," she says. "We make our own stars."

That's precisely what the 68-year-old Van Damme has done her whole life, building her career as a designer, a stylist, a restaurateur — you name it — on two basic precepts: "It has to be mad and it has to be beautiful." Van Damme, of course, is a little of both.

Earlier in the day I'd arrived here to find her overseeing work on the plunge pool she was having installed on one of the terraces below her veranda. She greeted me in a pair of tatty overalls and old rubber flip-flops, wavy gray hair clipped above her ears. Back in Mumbai, Van Damme cuts a graceful, elfin figure in flowing caftans and gypsy skirts, beads and pendants, patterns and textures all layered with abandon; here in the hills she is every inch the happy gardener, though no less graceful for that. She coos adoringly to her cows, Lakshmi and Sita (she uses their milk for homemade paneer and yogurt), and putters away for hours in the nursery where she's raising dozens of plants from cuttings gathered in England and Belgium, picked at nearby roadsides and carried up from the garden at her previous home in Goa.

Van Damme's parents first came to India in 1938 in the hopes of rebuilding their wealth after financial troubles left them bankrupt back home in Belgium. Born in 1945, raised on the outskirts of Bombay (now known as Mumbai), then in England, Van Damme spent the first part of her adult life in Brussels selling her vibrant, gypsy-style clothes to diplomats and royals populating the staid capital city.

When she returned to India for good in 1999, Van Damme opened a restaurant called the Olive Ridley in Morjim, on an empty beach that is now one of the more fashionable seaside stretches in Goa — too fashionable, in fact, for Van Damme's liking. Tiring of the crowds, she moved inland in 2003 to a guesthouse she designed on a hill between two branches of the Mapusa River. People thought she was crazy to build away from the coast. "As usual, my project was taken very negatively by everyone," she remembers. "And I must say, the more people

say 'don't do it,' the more I think 'but I'm right.'" And she was. The five-bedroom Indo-Portuguese guest villa, which she named Panchavatti (from the Sanskrit for "five trees"), with its lovingly tended garden, marvelous views and open, Geoffrey Bawa-inspired architecture, began attracting a steady client base of artists, writers, filmmakers and creative types. They came for the quiet, for the home-cooked meals, for the rooms filled with antiques and objects from Van Damme's own peripatetic life — but mostly they came for Van Damme herself, who presided like a patroness over a fashionable salon.

In 2005, while still running Panchavatti, she came on board to help style a shop called Bungalow 8 in Mumbai. The store's founder, Maithili Ahluwalia, says that Van Damme has since become "the godmother, the grande dame" of what is one of the most popular design shops in Mumbai, a three-story emporium of clothes, furniture, jewelry, accessories and objets d'art imbued with Van Damme's singular style. Through Bungalow 8 and Panchavatti, Van Damme has honed a distinctive haute-bohemian look that is frequently imitated in Mumbai, built on the juxtaposition of old and new. "Loulou's aesthetic has nothing to do with products or items. It's about a worldview," Ahluwalia told me, recalling her first visit to Van Damme's

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NATURE MADE
Clockwise from right: a table set for an alfresco dinner; the kitchen, where Van Damme prepares fresh meals using dairy products from her cows and produce from the garden; the front porch, with a hand-knotted cashmere throw, inspired by the tiger prayer-rugs used by Tibetan monks, draped over a cane chair.



Goan guesthouse. “Panchavatti was the storybook of a person and her history. Every room was another chapter.”

Van Damme sold Panchavatti in 2011, but she has continued that story at the new guesthouse in the Palani Hills, a two-bedroom cottage that nods to the style of English bungalows and French plantation houses built here during the Raj (the property abutting Van Damme’s is a working pepper and coffee plantation founded by French Jesuits). There’s the outdoor teak furniture; there’s the handknit cashmere “leopard-skin” carpet, a take on the tiger carpets used by Tibetan monks for meditation, that took Van Damme’s weaver in Delhi a year to complete; there’s the Turkish kilim, similar to the ones she used to sell in Belgium; and there are shelves of books bought at art exhibitions. Storytelling, the feeling of life in process, is at the core of Van Damme’s aesthetic: as much collage as narrative, constantly in flux, defined not by the perfectly placed object, but by the perfectly misplaced one.

Van Damme’s birthplace, Kodaikanal, is a 90-minute drive from her latest property. Kodaikanal is one of the hill stations that the

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SIMPLE PLEASURES
From top: the garden combines native vegetation with plants gathered from around the world; a bedroom looks south over the hills.
Opposite: Van Damme wears a silk dress of her own design, an Indian dupatta over her shoulder and a collection of antique men’s jewelry from Rajasthan.



British established throughout the subcontinent as temperate highland escapes, away from the steaming, teeming cities. She was born here (her name is still in the records at the Van Allen Hospital: “They have these huge ledgers, and there I am: ‘Isla Maria Van Damme. Birth: Normal.’ Not normal!”), but Van Damme was raised in Marol, which today is a dense industrial suburb near Mumbai’s international airport, then a dense forest far from the urban hub of South Bombay. “My youth was ... I would say, *junglee*,” Van Damme remembers, using the Hindi word for “wild.” “I was a tomboy — short hair, in the trees.” At 9, Van Damme was packed off to England to study in a convent school.

By 15 Van Damme was booted out for things like making clandestine trips to the candy shop in town and keeping a transistor radio in her room (“Decadent! I was decadent! Can you imagine?”). After a brief stint at a private school near Cambridge, she was sent to Heidelberg to study German for a year, and at 17 came to Brussels for the first time. There, she met her (now former) husband, whom she followed back to England a year later. After three years in London, primarily spent working in a store that specialized in high-end Indian garments, Van Damme went back to Brussels to establish her own shop, Santosh.

“When I see it now, I say, ‘I was completely crazy.’ A Belgian woman, first of all, is the most difficult in the world. The first thing she’ll do is look inside at the seams. That’s a Belgian: very classical, very severe. And here I am at 22 with my huge Rajasthani skirts, and I sold it to them,” she says, as though still a little astonished. “Even our queen came. They all came — and they loved it.”

And though Van Damme’s personal style is more Banjara than Belgian, she is fastidious about the most minute details. She began to design her own collections for the shop, working closely with some of the finest embroiderers in Gujarat and textile designers in Delhi. Eventually, she started receiving commissions for one-of-a-kind garments — wedding dresses and gowns that she would sketch during long, in-depth interviews. Santosh became a kind of parlor for adventurous women with Van Damme not just selling, but outfitting and advising. (Even now, when visiting Bungalow 8, Van Damme thrills at the opportunity to sell. “I love dressing fat women — always very badly looked after by salesgirls. And I take them and say, ‘Of course we can dress you!’”)

At 50, Van Damme reached a turning point. “50 is 50,” she told me, “more than halfway through.” That was when she decided to return to India for good. Then, a couple of years ago, she uprooted herself once again — a move that has brought her even closer to her birthplace. “Change, change, change all the time” is, after



GREEN ACRES
Clockwise from right: Van Damme with her cow Lakshmi, whose milk she uses to make butter, paneer and yogurt; the view to the south from the Palani Hills; the bathroom, decorated with tiles handmade in a style traditional to Tamil Nadu’s Chettinad region; artworks gathered over years of sourcing trips around India adorn the walls.



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all, a kind of mantra for her. Moving to this plot of land in the hills is both a homecoming and a grand new adventure.

Despite her age, Van Damme says that she is busier now than she has ever been. On top of her work with Bungalow 8, which requires frequent trips around India, she is designing homes for a smattering of clients, styling interiors and photo shoots and, much to her surprise and delight, even modeling — and refusing to wear even a shred of makeup while doing it. “Loulou embraces age,” Ahluwalia had told me, “because she embraces life.” And life, as Van Damme’s homes have so clearly demonstrated, leaves beautiful traces.

Now that her guesthouse in the hills is complete, she’s begun work on the design for a second, larger house farther along the ridge. By the time that’s finished, Van Damme plans to be growing as much as 60 percent of the produce she needs for herself and her guests in her own garden. She recently started making her own butter; she may even learn to make cheese. She’s talked about starting up a drum festival with her neighbors to promote local tribal music and wants to work with a friend to improve sanitation and awareness about littering in the nearby villages.

It all sounds exhausting, but Van Damme simply explains, “I have to hurry up and have all my dreams now.”

