



Glenogle in the Ghats

Neville Patel runs a heritage resort in a 19th century bungalow that has been owned by his family for 100 years

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What 26-year-old Neville Patel remembers most about his family home set amid seven-and-a-half acres of forest land in the hill station of Mahabaleshwar in the Western Ghats, is horse riding, magic shows in the huge compound, cycling around the property, outdoor barbeques, very short trips to the market and back, and reading after lunch till late in the evening. “We never really went out much,” he says of the three-week, once-a-year holidays that he took with parents Cyrus and Erzaan and brother Tushar at Glenogle, “from the time I was a one-year-old right up to my teens.” At a downtown coffee shop in Bombay, in conversation with *Parsiana* on August 13, 2016, Neville says, “I never thought I would be involved in running the place in the future (as a resort) even when I was in college” at Les Roches International School of Hotel Management in Switzerland.

Patel explains that his father’s family has owned Glenogle since 1917. “Unfortunately, we do not have much information prior to when my great-grandfather bought it from the descendants of Sir Jacob Elias Sassoon (Bt),” he informs, but



dates it to about 1840. The Patels used the bungalow till 2014 as a summer getaway. “There has always been a *mali* (gardener), whose family has worked for us since my great-grandfather’s time... the old gentleman always used to keep the garden maintained extremely well, and we used to win prizes for the best garden in Mahabaleshwar when such competitions were held till the 1960s,” he informs. After 2014, the place is run as a resort by Nepa Hospitality Private Limited, of which Patel is the managing director. On offer is 6,000 sq ft of living area, comprising a hall, dining room, four master bedrooms along with a children’s room, all fitted with heirloom furniture and modern amenities.

The family had no real financial plans for the property or intentions to run it themselves as a resort “until I graduated from Les Roches; after which they decided they wanted to see how much I had actually learned at the school,” he laughs, adding that he has completed two work experience semesters – in Sicily at the Kempinski and in New York at the Radisson.

“Most people would think that the ambience and the style of Glenogle is the

reason why they go, but I think the real reason people go is to bond with their entire family under one roof.” The rooms in the heritage property are generally let out to one family at a time. “What an opportunity it is to go there with the people you love and just take in all the good vibes around you,” he says, exulting about the wrap-around verandah and the extensive gardens and forest trails. “We are giving families a home so that they can just enjoy each other’s company... all the other stuff is just nice to have, but that’s not our USP (unique selling proposition); our USP is getting families under one roof to bond with each other privately.”

The challenges of running a heritage property are “no different from running a regular hotel in Mahabaleshwar of the same standard,” except they have to pay more attention to the heritage theme, says the managing director. “The problems lie in making sure directions are followed all the way to the ground without being misinterpreted or brushed off,” he says. Maintenance is “constant and expensive,” he states. Despite the “heavy rains and very high moisture levels, we are doing our best to make sure things are kept well, given that it is a very old structure.”

After graduation from Les Roches on

November 30, 2012, Patel started working on Glenogle on December 9 of the same year, he grins, rattling off exact dates. The interiors were restored by design firm Dhruvi Vaidya Design Studio, he adds. "I saw it as a task I just had to complete ... I just kept working towards that in every single way," he says. What did get his goat is "the lackadaisical attitude of some vendors and laborers who work something like four to five hours a day, which is insane!" The gratification came from the fact that "we ended up opening on schedule anyway."

Glenogle has a largely Gujarati clientele mainly from Bombay. They would have hosted hardly two Zoroastrian families in the last six months. "Our occupancy is growing at about 18% year on year since we opened," states a happy Patel, adding that prices change based on the season and time of booking. Tariffs for renting the property range between Rs 35,000 and Rs 40,000 plus taxes per night. Take a virtual tour on www.glenoglebungalow.com A permanent staff of about eight is employed round the year. Guests can either order meals from nearby restaurants or instruct the in-house cook.

Facing page: A panoramic view of Glenogle and Neville Patel; clockwise from below: garden, rest room, dining area and bedroom



"We like it exactly the way it is and don't plan on changing or adding anything structurally," Patel states. They "just want it to be maintained as it is, and for it to be visited." A recent convert to beekeeping, he is going to offer that experience to visitors over the next year. Explaining that they already have about 10 beehives (boxes) which he experimented with, he exults that the "last batch of honey came out wonderfully." The environmentalist in him wants to start planting jambul trees all over the property at the end of the current monsoon season "to increase the density of our jungle where trees have fallen due to heavy monsoons," and then "slowly work on the rest of the hill station with the help of the local forest department." Concerned about the sustainability of Mahabaleshwar, he says, "If people just visit without learning about the area, we won't see them take care of it or come back."

The Patels have a family business "which was established by my great grandfather in 1905, not related to hospitality at all," he smiles. Run by his father Cyrus and uncle Pesi, they provide manpower for IT (information technology) enabled services and also manufacture and service machinery for cotton seed oil extraction." Mathematics is currently a fascination

for the managing director, who spends "33% of my time studying the subject, 33% working for the resort and 33% in the family business." Not a fan of reading books, flashing his iPad, the hospitality executive states he is listening currently to three audio books at the same time: a newly released biography of Elon Musk, Eckhart Tolle's *The power of now* and *Sell or be sold* by Grant Cardone. The resort owner plays squash, "knows how to play golf," and dabbles in restoring vintage cars. A student at Cathedral and John Connon School in Bombay till class seven, he graduated from the International School in Bangalore before proceeding to Switzerland. Elder brother Tushar is studying classical music at The True School of Music in Bombay.

Calling himself a liberal Zoroastrian, Patel says interfaith marriages are inevitable, "given our small and dwindling numbers." The young businessman prays at Warden Road's Saher Agiary "fairly often," but does not regularly wear the sudreh and kusti. He believes that if vultures were in plenty, dakhmenashini is the correct method of disposal for the dead, but since there aren't, one has to think of alternative modes. "I'm not really very religious, but I'm definitely proud to be a Parsi from Bombay," he ends. ❁

