

# A new Asian luxe

Design guru Jaya Ibrahim is raising the bar on contemporary Asian luxury with his new furniture line and planning a brand of boutique resorts, spas and residences

| BY AARON DE SILVA |

Jaya Ibrahim's oeuvre reads like the holiday itinerary of an A-list Hollywood executive: The Capella, Singapore; The Nam Hai, Vietnam; Aman at the Summer Palace, Beijing; The Setai, Miami; The Chedi Muscat, Oman; The Datai, Langkawi; The Legian, Bali; and the legendary Four Seasons Jimbaran, Bali. Each one is an exercise in exquisite simplicity; each one subtly blends Asian and Western sensibilities with vernacular nuances.

Now, having established himself after two decades in the business, the Indonesian is ready to embark on a new enterprise, the Jaya brand, capitalising on his design prowess as well as his celebrity among the jet-setters. The 10-year plan, according to Bruce M Goldstein, principal of JID (Jaya International Design), is to launch a boutique hotel and resort, a destination spa, branded residences as well as lifestyle products that will include fabrics, carpets, houseware, leather goods and luggage. In short, everything a style-conscious globetrotter could possibly want. The eventual goal, reveals Goldstein, is to become the Asian equivalent of luxury lifestyle supremo Giorgio Armani.

First up, a 38-piece collection of premium furnishings called Jaya Classics, retailed exclusively at Space Furniture in Singapore. Why furniture? "Well, so far, I've been designing hotels, and while I was designing them, I found it was also necessary for me to design the furniture, because I could never find the appropriate furniture for the specific project," the soft-spoken and preternaturally shy Jaya tells *Options*. "To my surprise, everybody wanted my furniture. After 20 years in the business, we decided it was time." Which begs the question, why only now? To which he replies, "When you design, you can promise anything, but when it's a product, you have to promise good quality, that it's everlasting, and so on. These things are not easy to establish just like that. Now we're in a better position."

The collection features an extensive use of luxurious, refined timber, particularly Makassar ebony and sonokeling, or Javanese rosewood, rather than the more ubiquitous teakwood that characterises much of Indonesian furniture. Because of the woods' scarcity — they're slow-growth — supply is limited. For the moment, only 36 pieces of each item in the collection are available, though Jaya is quick to stress that this is not a marketing ploy but a genuine case of supply deficit. So, while that would make it a luxury to own a Jaya piece, the designer's definition of luxury is "To have something that's man-made, naturally rare, and that shows nature in its true form, with slight irregularities. You can't find two pebbles that are exactly alike, for instance. And to have control of it, to have it in your possession, or to immerse yourself in such an environment, is what I'd call luxury."

The furniture is handcrafted in Semarang, said to have the best woodworking workshops in all of Java.



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Fundamental to Jaya's interiors are balance, order and symmetry. Carefully ordered arrangements of furniture convey this reverence for formality. A classical composer of spaces, Jaya considers every element of the space — its shape, proportions, colour and finish — to ensure a harmonious final composition. Interior architectural elements such as windows, doors and textured wall panels are used to accentuate height and volume. Rarely does he stray from warm tones and a natural palette of timber, stone, rattan, cotton, silk and linen. In Jaya's precisely ordered universe, no detail is too small to escape notice: the bronze sculpture is perfectly matched to the bronze candle stand; the linen bedspread is twinned with the linen drapes.

Having symmetry and harmony, Jaya says, "Allows you to relax and not think about an alternative layout that might be better." He adds that he has rearranged the layout of some hotel guestrooms to suit his needs. It's an occupational hazard that stems from an inherent desire to perfect the guest experience. Where some designers conceptualise the overall scheme and then fill in the details as they go along, Jaya tends to reverse-engineer his spaces, starting from the user's perspective.

"When I design a hotel, the first question I ask is, 'Who are your guests?'," he explains. "I always design a hotel for the guests' needs, what I think they expect to see when they come into the room, where the bathroom should be, and so on. For a hotel, you cannot have too strong a style. I like my interiors to be in the background. As a guest, you don't want to be confront-

ed by something you can't cope with." As a result, his suites are endowed with a graceful elegance, free from contrivances. "I imagine [my guests] to be elegant people who enjoy elegant surroundings, otherwise they wouldn't have paid so much. When my guests walk into a room, they must feel that all I've put into the room is ready to receive them."

Much like how a court readies itself to welcome a monarch, one surmises. This seemingly intuitive understanding of the aristocratic mind is a product of Jaya's background. Born into a prestigious family in Java — Jaya's mother is of royal stock and his father owned a bank — Jaya left home at a young age to reside in London. Forgoing a career in banking, Jaya did the unthinkable (by well-to-do Indonesian family standards) by working as a waiter and dishwasher in the ultra-hip Blakes Hotel. It was at Blakes, arguably the world's first boutique hotel, that Jaya cultivated his design sensibilities working as an assistant to renowned hotelier Anouska Hempel. By the same token, years of living abroad sharpened his innate sense of classical Indonesian aesthetics.

"Being in London was wonderful because I was a foreigner and could do all sorts of things. The public was very forgiving or hardly even noticed me. You could reinvent yourself very easily, too. London gave me the confidence to be a brave individual with a good chance of success," he says. He returned to Indonesia in 1991, and set up JID two years later with partner John Saunders. Today, the firm operates a number of offices, including in Jakarta, Miami, Singapore and

Shanghai, that proffer architectural, interior and furniture design.

Goldstein reveals that the company has so far invested about US\$1 million in the Jaya brand, including the marketing budget and fees for Boston Consultancy Group (BCG) and Ernst & Young. "We went to BCG because we wanted to have the best strategy. If I had to summarise that strategy, it would be: do what we do well, concentrate on doing that, and partner with other people. Ernst & Young put together a plan for us to raise capital. We'll probably be looking at around US\$10 million," he says. The company is currently working with a private investor and may launch an IPO in the future.

"Our ROI [return on investment] is very high, because we're starting from zero. Our money is mostly invested in hiring the best people... an infrastructure of people to deliver the brand and service quality," says Goldstein. The Jaya brand, he adds, has entered into a joint venture with luxury hotel and resort operator GHM. "We already have a pipeline of four projects that we're working on throughout Asia. Two of the first four locations are in Mainland China, one is in Indonesia, and one is in Myanmar. But you probably won't be able to walk into a Jaya hotel for another 2½ or three years. Someday, we hope to have our own Jaya stores too. We can build this brand in the next decade to be a household name, whereas it took Giorgio Armani almost 30 years." ■

*Aaron De Silva enjoys experiencing the world, and relishes writing about it afterwards*

## Highlights of the Jaya Classics collection

### Sonokeling legs and frame with upholstered seat, back rest and side rest

The undulating line of the apron of this chaise longue was worked into the design to emulate the French penchant for "flourishes" when it comes to designing their furniture. Stylistically, it also borrows from the southern Chinese style of furniture.



### Bronze base, stem and finial with a silk shade

"Arya" has its origin in the Javanese language; it refers to a rank among those who defend the leader of the kingdom, the regent, and indeed any specific community. Here, the word alludes to the quality of an arya — stable, no-nonsense, practical and useful.



### Sonokeling frame and legs with upholstered seat rest and back rest

A reference to couturier Shiatzy Chen from Taipei, whose work is traditional in spirit, yet contemporary in execution. This chair derives from the first generation of furniture that was designed by Jaya for the many Shiatzy stores around the world.



### Sonokeling legs and frame with a makassar ebony top

"Nahm" means water in many Southeast Asian countries. Like its sibling, the Nahm Chaise Lounge, the flourish for its apron represents flowing water, and gives the piece additional character.

### Black lacquered legs and frame with tarnished gold shagreen and sandblasted teak door panels

"Shwe" is the Burmese word for gold. Here, it refers to the quality of gold — quietly sumptuous, pure and authentic through and through.

