

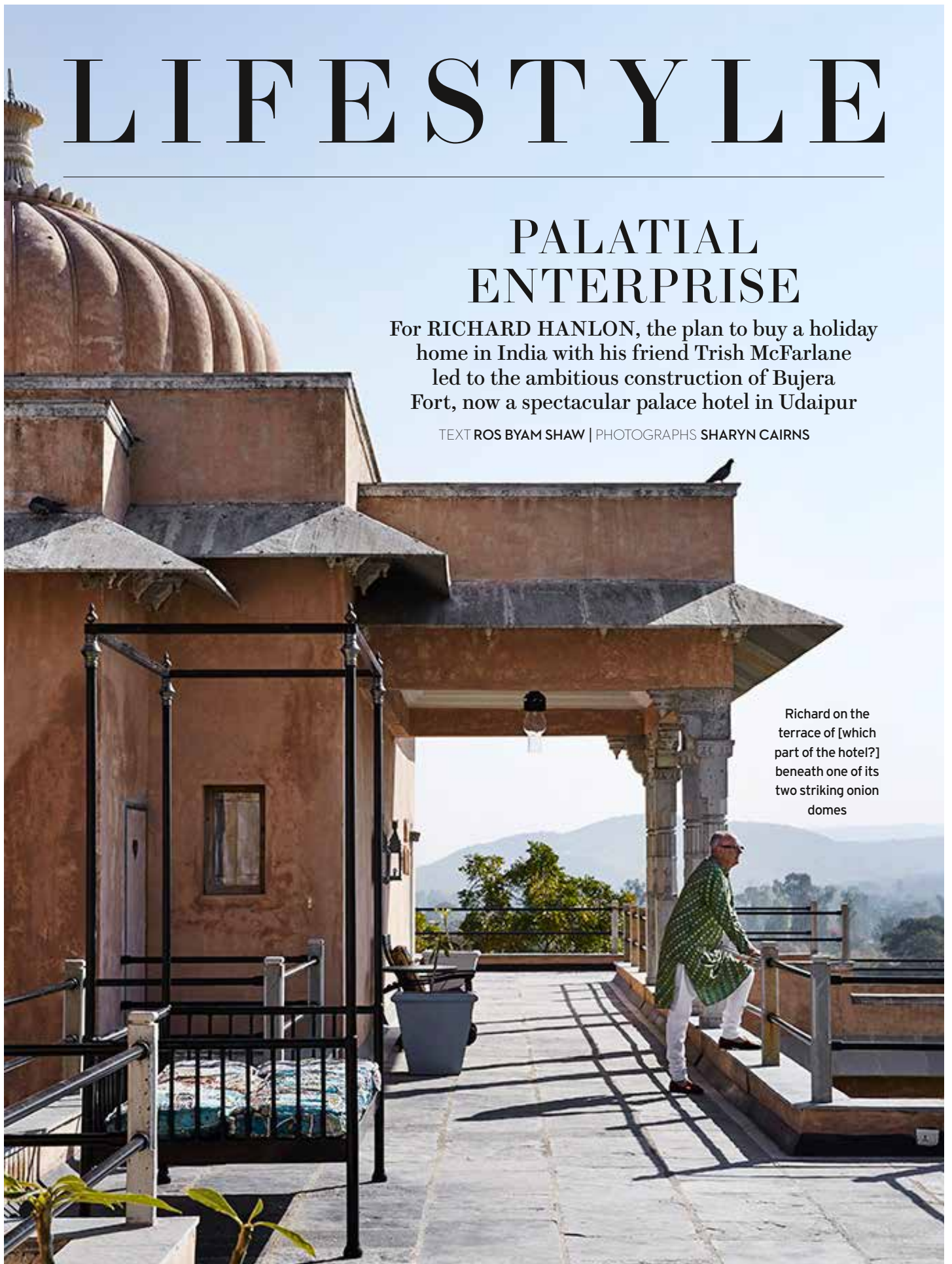
LIFESTYLE

PALATIAL ENTERPRISE

For RICHARD HANLON, the plan to buy a holiday home in India with his friend Trish McFarlane led to the ambitious construction of Bujera Fort, now a spectacular palace hotel in Udaipur

TEXT ROS BYAM SHAW | PHOTOGRAPHS SHARYN CAIRNS

Richard on the terrace of [which part of the hotel?] beneath one of its two striking onion domes





LEFT A statue of a lion stands in an archway leading from the central pool. RIGHT Richard, dressed in traditional Indian attire, stands in the archway.



ABOVE [who is in pic? in the hotel?]. RIGHT [Pieces from the garden? somewhere in the hotel? pieces bought by Richard?]



BELOW LEFT The garden's lawns are planted with frangipani, orange, lemon and mango trees, with a marble-lined pool at the centre. BELOW RIGHT [Flowers/pot plants? from the garden? standing on the terrace?]



There is something quietly heroic about Richard Hanlon, and like all the best heroes, he plays it down. But spend more than a day in his company, ask a few questions, and you will find yourself marvelling at his courage, stoicism, perseverance and sheer, obstinate belief in a project that might have driven a lesser man to drink.

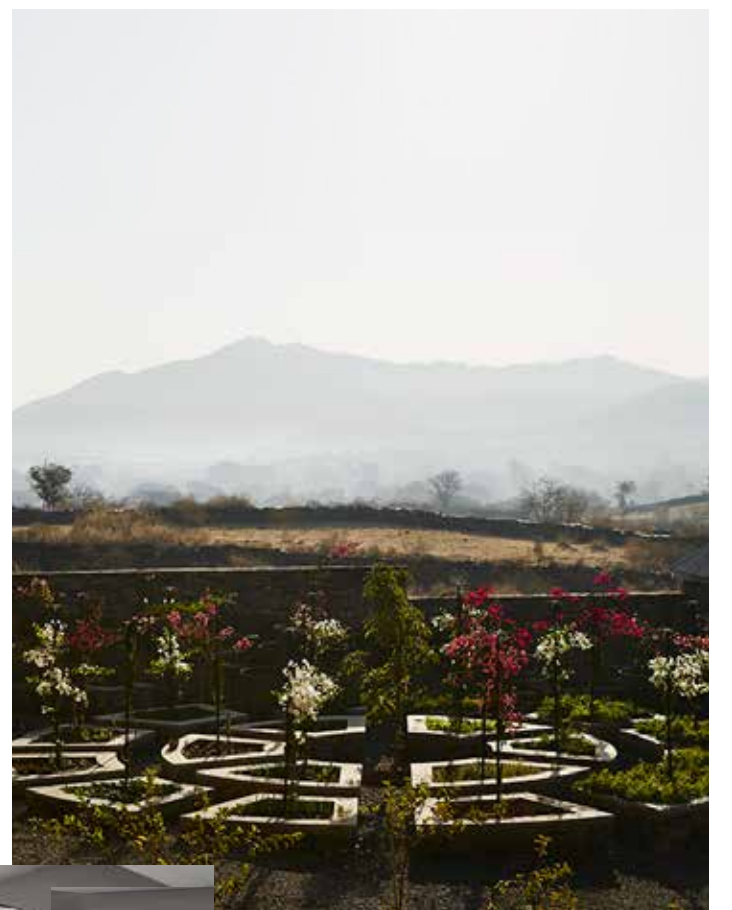
Ten years ago, Richard and his long-time friend, Trish McFarlane, bought a plot on the edge of a small village some five miles outside Udaipur in the west of India. On these two acres of rocky scrubland, surrounded by the dusky silhouettes of the Aravalli Range, with a view towards the glint of Lake Pichola and Udaipur's famous City Palace, they built a small palace of their own, a hotel, and called it Bujera Fort.

Arriving today, up the rutted track that leads out of Bujera village, it is difficult to believe that this beautiful building, its outer walls frothing with white bougainvillea, was only recently finished. The tall outer gates swing open and a drive rises steeply to end in a raised turning circle. Steps lead up to a huge pair of metal-studded wooden double doors, which are closed at night but otherwise stand wide in welcome.

The hotel looks like an image of paradise from a medieval manuscript. Shady cloisters enclose a garden of fresh, green lawn, planted with sweet-smelling frangipani, orange, lemon and mango trees, and at its centre there is a large, square, marble-lined pool of aquamarine water. On the opposite side of the courtyard and pool, a pair of lobed onion domes is silhouetted against the intense blue sky. After the heat and dust, and the heart-quickenng chaos of Indian roads, all is quiet beauty. Presiding over it, urbane and reassuring, is Richard, British as apple crumble but also completely at home in this corner of a foreign land.

Now in his sixties, Richard was brought up near Newcastle and did a training scheme at Sotheby's in 1973 before working for his father's engineering company. He then was an estate agent before turning his hand to interior decorating. Having lived in the Cotswolds, he made the momentous decision to put his money, time, energy and future into this project [in 2006?]. But why?

Richard's explanation is disarming. 'Trish and I came to India for a friend's wedding back in the Seventies,' he says. 'We loved it and started coming every year for holidays. We wanted to buy a holiday home together, and that turned into the idea of retiring



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP [The hotel's garden], with views of the Aravalli Range in the distance. Tomatoes grown in the garden. Richard in the [hotel kitchen? with the chef?]



here, partly inspired by Deborah Moggach's book, *These Foolish Things*. We saw a couple of wonderful houses, but they weren't quite right. So we started to look for land, found this site, and decided to combine relocation with making a living.' All this said as though running a hotel in India was the most standard retirement plan in the world.

Their ideas for the hotel were sketched by Richard, drawn up by a draughtsman, interpreted by a local architect and put into practice by local craftsmen, all overseen by Richard. Trish paid regular



visits from her base in London, where she continues to work as a diamond broker before she retires in the next few years. It is a clever design; the aesthetics are traditional and vernacular. Doors and windows are reclaimed, while the roof is insulated by 76,000 handmade terracotta pots from Jaipur. There is also solar heating, rainwater gathering and sewage filtration. On the lower ground floor, there is a spa, shop and spacious accommodation for staff. Two palatial suites are on the first floor beneath the onion domes, and flanking the main gate are five further bedrooms and bathrooms. At one corner of the building there is a self-contained, three-bedroom house for guests to rent, which has its own garden and plunge pool.

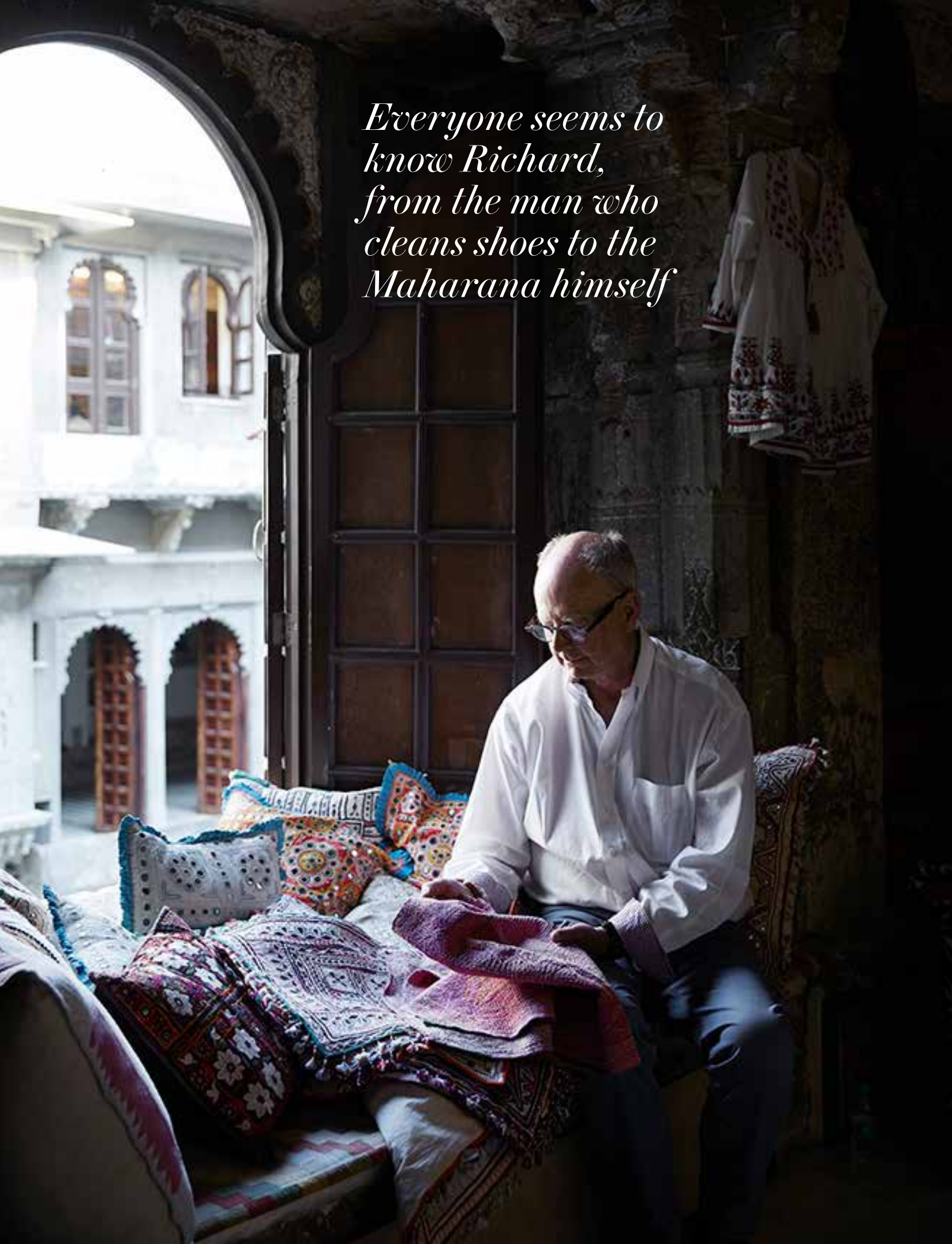
Richard and Trish live at the opposite corner of the hotel, down two sets of steps from the courtyard, in a four-bedroom bungalow with its own entrance, a deep verandah with a fireplace, and a private garden full of lemon trees. 'It's a haven of sanity and peace,' says Richard, 'yet only a minute away from the hotel. It's essential to keep a close eye on things, especially for a detail fanatic like me.'

Looking back on how it all began, Richard is inclined to minimise the difficulties, but they were plentiful and persistent, from the complications of buying the land and obtaining planning permission, to the horrors of a flood that left his possessions floating in a foot of water, an attack by an angry monkey that stripped the newly planted garden, and a bout of dengue fever that left Richard prostrate for a month. 'Nothing would have been possible without the incredible kindness of friends,' he says. Just as they were ready for business, they found a large crack in the swimming pool, meaning they missed hosting the cast of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, who were due to stay while filming a sequel.

THIS PAGE FROM TOP [A sitting/drawing room in the main hotel/Richard and Trish's bungalow?]. Richard with [names of other people? whereabouts?]. Lake Pichola?. A guest bedroom? [any info on where furnishings in bedroom/sitting room from?]



Everyone seems to know Richard, from the man who cleans shoes to the Maharana himself



Eventually the hotel opened in autumn 2015, and has been busy ever since. On a typical day, after morning meetings with staff, planning meals with the chef and generally checking that all is running smoothly, Richard climbs into his battered Jeep to bump along lanes, taking the back route into Udaipur, past fields of maize and mango orchards, then skirting the shore of the lake where water buffalo graze. Greeted by soldiers at the City Palace gates, he is waved through to park under the walls in the palace grounds. Here he often calls in at Aashka, the shop belonging to the Maharana's daughter, Princess Bhargavi, before emerging through the triple-arched Tripoliya gate onto the streets for iced tea in the cool inner courtyard of Ganesh Handicraft Emporium, another favourite shop. Here, the rooms of a seventeenth-century haveli are crammed with embroideries, miniatures, carvings and beadwork, both old and new.

Everyone seems to know Richard, from the man who cleans shoes on the main street and the waiters in restaurants to the Maharana himself, Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur. They often dine together and Richard accompanies him to weddings – some of the most glamorous and elaborate in India. 'The wedding entertainments are remarkable,' Richard says. 'I have seen violinist Vanessa-Mae, Cirque du Soleil, Jennifer Lopez, the London Philharmonic Orchestra – no expense is spared.' Trish visits regularly, and says she is looking forward to the day she retires and moves here permanently.

'There is so much I love about Udaipur,' says Richard. 'Of course there are drawbacks: the weather varies wildly from two degrees Celsius to 50, which makes growing vegetables quite a challenge. Shopping takes forever and driving can be quite hair-raising, but the people here are gentle, friendly and have been very welcoming. I have never felt safer anywhere in the world. Also, of course, it's staggeringly beautiful, which warms the heart and nourishes the soul every moment of the day and night.'

Richard's warm relationships are partly due to his policy of sourcing locally – from fabrics and furnishings to vegetables grown by the farmer down the lane. 'We eat seasonal produce, much of which we grow ourselves, and we make all our own pickles, jams, and bread. We want our guests to feel at home but also totally cared for.' Shakti Rathore, who met Richard through his rickshaw-driver uncle and now helps to run the hotel, quotes a Sanskrit verse: 'Atithi devo bhava' (consider the guest as God). In a setting as divine as this, you are likely, even if just for a moment or two, to feel like one □

Bujera Fort: bujerafort.com



OPPOSITE Richard at ??????. THIS PAGE ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP With ???? and cattle? doing?. Lady from/at?. Shopping at Ganesh Handicraft Emporium. Where is this with archway? Being measured for ??? at ????

