



Fashion Forward

BY KEL FLANDERS PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL BERNABE



Modernising a shophouse from the 1940s but keeping the original features might be a challenge, but this gorgeous home in Newton manages to do both, adding rich and sophisticated décor for a luxurious feel and elegance.

Who lives here: Dutch couple Maria-Rosa Vyskocil and David Heijkoop
Time in Singapore: Four years
Size and type of home: Three-bedroom, two-storey modern shophouse
Décor style: Relaxed luxe

Opening the gate to an ultra-modern shophouse in Newton is a very petite, fit and beautiful woman. Maria-Rosa greets me with a warm hug, a kiss and an apology about drinking her smoothie. I instantly regret not making it to the gym that morning. As we walk into the lounge, which is straight off the entry courtyard, a wallpapered wall is the first thing I notice – large pink peonies on a black background. It's bold and striking, and I love it (though I'm a bit freaked out at the bugs that are also depicted, larger than life, on the petals!). This is the second time that Maria-Rosa and her partner of 16 years, David, have lived in Singapore. In the six years since they left Amsterdam, the couple have lived here twice and also recently in Hong Kong. They returned just a few months ago.

Slinging it to Singapore

As we both curl up on her wide and comfy sofa, Maria-Rosa freely admits she wasn't sure about the original move to Singapore from Holland. David worked for a large multinational Dutch dairy company and was offered the opportunity to relocate. But it was a really difficult decision for them, as they were both happy with their lives and careers (Maria-Rosa was working for a large fashion brand).



"I strangely have a degree in nursing, as I had loved working part-time in a retirement home when I was in school. But, during my degree, I realised nursing was a lot different to what I'd expected." After she graduated, much to her family's horror, she decided to go into fashion, working as store manager for an international fashion brand.

Marta-Rosa quickly made her way up the brand's promotion chain and was soon responsible for opening up new Wolford stores all over the Netherlands. This career path led her to work for another iconic Dutch fashion label. "I was living my dream life in Amsterdam. I loved my job as the retail director for SuperTrash. I started there at the beginning and the brand was expanding so quickly. The company was led by a group of passionate young women, all in our twenties. I was responsible for the retail department and opened stores for them across the world – from London and New York to Stockholm, and across The Netherlands and Belgium. I even lived in New York for a while.

"It took me seven months to decide if I wanted to give everything up and move to Singapore." Did she ultimately follow David and love? "No, not at all. That's why it took me so long! I really felt I had to make my own choice. I didn't want to end up resenting my husband for making me move! That wouldn't have been good for either of us and I believe you only regret the things you don't do. Although it was scary to let go of everything, I decided I wanted to go on this adventure.

Still, Marta-Rosa tells us she was still sad when she arrived. "I missed my dynamic job. Suddenly, I was



living in another country without work. I felt low for a few months. But then I decided if I wanted to feel better I needed to change things myself. So I decided to start my own fashion agency with the objective of bringing Dutch brands to Asia."

In the first month, she got in touch with Dutch celebrity Nikkie Plessen who had just started her own fashion brand, Nikkie.

"I became the Managing Director for Nikkie in Asia Pacific. The business went really well and we had stores in Indonesia, Singapore and China. It was around the same time that Kate Moss became the face of the brand."

But then David was offered a position in Hong Kong, and they were off. "Again, it was emotionally hard for me to settle in. The first year we were missing Singapore so much that we didn't see and appreciate Hong Kong the way it deserves."



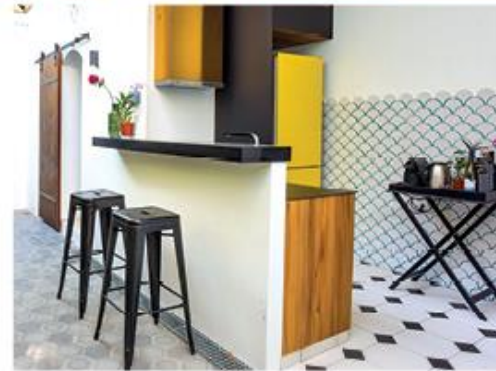
Career Goals

Marta-Rosa faced the similar problem in Hong Kong as when she first moved to Singapore. "I was still working for Nikkie but my days weren't filled with meetings and people anymore. I was travelling a lot in between Amsterdam, Singapore and Shanghai but back in Hong Kong I felt lonely, and it was hard to manage everything from there."

Realising she wasn't fulfilled, she decided to start her own business. The couple also felt it was time to move back to Singapore. "It's funny, when I was working for a big company, I felt alone. Now I'm working on my own, I don't feel lonely!"

Marta-Rosa has recently launched her own activewear brand, House Of Gravity. "While I was working in Fashion, I saw so many people working in their yoga pants, with biker boots combined with a cool top, vintage leather jacket or a designer bag." Using this as her inspiration, Marta-Rosa wants to bring the activewear trend, which is already popular in LA, Singapore and Hong Kong, also to Europe.

"Now I have creative and inspirational people around me all the time. I'm connected to people I've chosen to work with, and I have a feeling this is meant to be."



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Finding a Home

When they came back to Singapore, they searched for over a month to find a place. "We wanted somewhere with a bit of character this time. We didn't want to live in a standard condo again," Marta-Rosa tells me.

Then she stumbled upon this house. "It looked like nothing from the listing – just a picture of the outside. But when I walked in, I knew it was right!"

Having just been rejuvenated, restored and refreshed, this 1948 shophouse was just what they'd been looking for. The couple loved everything about the décor – including the original structural features, like the kitchen that opened up onto the rear courtyard and the outside bathroom. "It had been renovated so meticulously – even the tiles throughout the home were original. The builders had removed each one by hand and coated them before relaying them."

The house is filled with unique pieces they've collected during their expat journey. "We have some expensive designer items but some from markets in Bali and even Ikea. Every piece has a story. We moved so often we needed to buy storage to fit in any interior – Ikea always works for that and I love the combination. It's all blended together and I don't think I have more than one piece from any one store!"

The décor, which is Art Deco-inspired, also appealed. "It's so unusual to have wallpaper in a rental, especially in Singapore. The same goes for the carpet going up the stairs but we love it, even though it's orange."

I ask about the paintings that are dotted throughout the house. "They're from all over the world. My dad is from Prague, so I have a piece from there. There is one from Amsterdam above our bed, and a Hong Kong piece in the dining room (pictured, left). The paintings tell a story of our life."

With a genuine promise to check out the House Of Gravity's online store, I head off thinking about how Singapore is such a supportive place for passionate, smart female entrepreneurs.

"I convinced David to let me turn it into the walk-in closet! We don't have any storage space at all and this room is perfect."



*"I have a lot of favourite places in the house
I like to sit in the sunshine in the front
courtyard in the early morning with a
coffee and juice but I also love to work at
the dining space next to the kitchen in the
afternoon when it's hot"*



Recommendations

WINE & DINE

Latteria Mozzarella Bar ("I love the outdoor courtyard")
40 Duxton Hill

Don Ho ("the music, palm trees and great ambience")
1 Keong Saik Road

Tanjong Beach Club ("I work from here during the week")
120 Tanjong Beach Walk, Sentosa

Employees Only
112 Amoy Street

CUT by Wolfgang Puck ("great for cocktails")
Galleria Level, The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands

Olivia Restaurant & Lounge
55 Keong Saik Road, #01-03

HOME

Elements Concept
The AC Boutique, 420 Joo Chiat Road
9727 8169 / 9177 6043 | elementconcept.com

Originals
#02-03 Sime Darby Centre, 896 Dunearn Road
6471 9918 | originals.com.sg

Journey East
#03-02 Tan Boon Liat Building, 315 Outram Road
6473 1693 | journeyeast.com

ALSO

House Of GraVity
houseofgravity.com

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