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A journey that goes Southwest by East

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SANTA FE, N.M.—In a city famed for a distinctive Southwest aesthetic, a blend of Native American and Hispanic, a visit to the Inn of Five Graces is more like spending the night in a Near Eastern bazaar, or possibly a palace in India.

Fanciful ceramic tile murals of flowers, vases, fountains and birds, composed of broken plates from India's Rajasthan and pottery from Afghanistan, and edged in Mexican cobalt, green and yellow tiles, depict Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu themes in lavish bathrooms.

Ivory and sandstone screens from India, intricately-carved barriers that once sheltered women from the gazes of men, separate showers from bathtubs.

The elaborately-carved wood antique that serves as the vanity is from Afghanistan, as is the painted ceiling, and bathroom floors are covered with Turkish kilim rugs.



The Inn of the Five Graces features antique furnishings from India, Afghanistan and other eastern lands.

SHARON MCDONNELL PHOTO

Embroidered Uzbek textiles traditionally made for dowries, called *suzani*, adorn headboards in bedrooms, where rainbow-coloured Indian textiles and pillows top fluffy down feather beds. Sofas and chairs are upholstered in kilims and flat-weave Afghan *dhurries*, and delicate bird paintings, on century-old manuscript paper with Farsi inscriptions, are from an art school in Jaipur.

Massive, carved wooden doors mark entrances to bedrooms and closets, some inlaid with lapis and bone.

For many people, Afghanistan is a land of frightening headlines, forever at war. But for Ira Seret, a New York Jew who created the inn, it was simply home.

In the 1960s, he was working in a Manhattan boutique named *Abracadabra*, when a man offered to sell him five coats from Afghanistan.

The window display Seret designed for the embroidered sheepskin coats caught the eye of fashion designer Anne Klein, who commissioned him to acquire more.

So he went to Afghanistan in 1965, and began starting cottage industries and building factories.

"Doing business was sitting and eating, overlooking the Hindu Kush mountains, and looking at coats from shopkeepers," he says. "It was unbelievable, like Shangri-La. There were almond and walnut trees, and their courtyards and gardens were so special, straight out of miniature paintings."

Seret's coats became the darlings of models, rock musicians and hippies, scoring spreads in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Expanding to *dhurrie* rugs and silk tapestries, Seret opened a weaving factory in Balkh, next to a wall built by Alexander the Great.

As the bold colours and patterns of the Central and South Asian-inspired Seret aesthetic caught on, he collaborated with designer Angelo Donghia, designing tents inspired by Pakistani wedding canopies

"The Afghans were so amazing – so gentle, polite and giving. They'd offer you food, whatever they had – guests were the important thing in

their lives."

Seret married Sylvia Pfothenauer, a Columbia University assistant professor and textile designer whom he met on a 1974 visit to New York, and she moved with him to Afghanistan, where the oldest of their three sons was born.

After touring the American West by motorhome, the couple moved to Santa Fe, which reminded Seret of Afghanistan.

"The houses of adobe, the desert, the mountains – it was very cool."

They opened Seret & Sons, a shop crammed with Asian furnishings, tribal rugs and architectural antiques. Some have been displayed in museums: an exhibit of hand-painted Tibetan wood furniture at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, Calif., featured some of their collection.

After buying some derelict buildings in Santa Fe's oldest neighbourhood, a five-minute walk from their shop, they decided to convert them to an inn that would double as showroom space.

Christening it Seret's 1,001 Nights, the inn opened in 1993.

"It was as funky as you can possibly imagine," said Jennifer Hoback, who now manages Inn of the Five Graces.

Said Seret, "I didn't know anything about running a hotel."

But one day, a genie appeared, and made an offer the Serets couldn't refuse: He would lease the inn, pay for a remodel and take operating responsibilities off their hands. The Serets would still own the buildings and supply furnishings.

The genie, a Vermonter named David Garrett, recalled, "I wanted it as soon as I saw it, before my wife and I even spent the night."

Garrett had a hotel group that owned two small exclusive luxury hotels in New York's Adirondacks, and an *Architectural Digest* story about the Serets piqued his interest. He agreed to acquire the inn the first day he first saw it, on his first-ever Santa Fe visit in 2002.

"Good things happen fast. If you have to think too hard about something, you shouldn't do it," Garrett said.

The Serets' furnishings were carefully edited so the effect was less overwhelming. The bathrooms were enlarged to eye-popping proportions, and the Pink Adobe restaurant next door – a decades-old fixture in Santa Fe – was annexed.

Sylvia Seret designed the whimsical tile murals, and Ira custom-designed the dhurrie- and kilim-covered furnishings, in the transformation of 1,001 Nights into the jewel-like Inn of Five Graces, New Mexico's only Relais & Chateaux lodging.

The Serets had launched a charity, the Jindhag Foundation, to feed and care for Tibetan monks and nuns in exile in India in 2001. After the Taliban reduced Istalif, the town where Seret first bought sheepskin coats, to rubble in the late 1990s, and most villagers fled, the Serets' foundation paid to rebuild its main marketplace, where a distinctive turquoise and green glazed pottery was one of its prized handicrafts.

Abdul Ahmad Istalifi, a town elder and 40-year friend of the Serets who lived in Kabul, and his son, Ali, persuaded villagers that private money would rebuild the market, so long as they would do demolition and remove rubble themselves. Ali Istalifi moved from London to project manage. Thousands of villagers returned, and more than 110 shops reopened in 2005.

Soon afterward, at Santa Fe's International Folk Art Market, Istalif pottery became available for the first time outside Afghanistan as the Jindhag Foundation sponsored a booth, and Ali Istalifi came to visit his father's friends.

Memories of Afghanistan, as it was, still haunt Seret.

"I miss the pomegranate-juice roadside stands, the wonderful flatbread, the way they kept their melons cool by burying them underground instead of refrigeration."

Sharon McDonnell is a New Orleans-based freelance writer. Her trip was subsidized by New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs and the Inn of the Five Graces.

