



Slip, PÉRO. Jacket,  
SHRIYA SOM

## A Tale of Three Cities

Since moving to Los Angeles in 2012, designer and former Miss India Neha Kapur has carved out a fresh identity. Now, in her recently finished New Delhi nest, she reflects on the past decade and how life has finally come full circle. By VAISHNAVI NAYEL TALAWADEKAR. Photographed by VIKRAM KUSHWAH. Styled by SAMAR RAJPUT

It's just past 10am when I reach Neha Kapur's housing enclave in South Delhi, but the guard at the gate has no intention of letting me in. No cabs allowed, I'm told, although he is unwilling to commit how far I have to leg it. With half an hour to go (my meeting is scheduled for 10.30am), I convince myself that it can't be that far. So I pop on my sunhat and slip through the gate, in search of the magic number I have scrawled on my palm. Only, several mistaken turns later, I still can't find it. Finally, a dhobi kindly points me to a cul-de-sac I'd passed several times, but never noticed—with a four-storey fortress hidden in plain sight.

When I step out of the elevator, the door is wide open and Kapur is seated on a shimmering shamrock divan. She smiles when she sees me, her cheeks deepening into dimples as she glides over to welcome me with a warm hug. Even in a pristine white kurta pyjama, hair left down and sans makeup, the former Miss India effortlessly channels part mondaine, part demigoddess.

As we settle in Kapur's living room, her coffee table has already been set up with floral arrangements, bowls of savouries and glistening pots of tea (she's a 1 Magnolia Lane and Good Earth

loyalist). The palatial chandelier and wall sconces (which I later learn are handmade by artisans in Rajasthan) are turned on, making the room glow like a jewel box. "The spot where we're sitting, I grew up here," she muses, pouring me a cup of honey tea. "It used to be a two-storey house back in the day. My schooling, my college, everything happened here." By the time she got married to actor Kunal Nayyar of *The Big Bang Theory* fame in 2011 and moved to Los Angeles, her childhood home had fallen into disrepair, and Kapur and her brothers, along with their parents, decided to tear down the original structure and build afresh. Instead of two floors, they built four—one for her parents and one for each sibling.

"For the first few years, every time we'd visit home, we would shuttle between my in-laws and parents, so this arrangement was ideal. It was close enough for comfort, yet contained enough for independent living," says Kapur, for whom it was important that the home stand apart from her and Nayyar's other properties in London and Los An-

### FINDING HER WAY HOME

Opposite page: Kapur enjoys shuttling between Los Angeles, London and New Delhi. For now, she says, all three feel like home





geles. For the interior design, she turned to her dear cousin, interior designer Radhika Jha of Radhika Jha Designs, with a very specific brief. “I told her it needs to feel like a maharani’s suite,” she recalls. “Something that dials back time but is also decidedly India Modern.” What she also specified was an ‘In India, by India’ ethos that would shine a light on the artisans behind the magic. Everything had to be a labour of love: local, sustainable, unprocessed and thoughtfully handmade.

True to her words, the two-bedroom apartment brims with artisanal curiosities. In the living room, a gloriously restored gharana pichwai emblazons one wall, while a pencil and wash titled *Jai Singh’s Observatory* by Thomas and William Daniell punctuates another. A sculptural pillar—one of four from an ancient temple—occupies a corner of the dining area, where a huge mother-of-pearl table, found at the back of a dusty warehouse, takes pride of place. Jamawars are a recurring leitmotif, appearing first in a bespoke three-panel divider near the entrance, then again as a skirt along the custom marble coffee table. Around us, the walls and ceiling wear a midnight-toned wallpaper that Kapur and Jha had custom-made in silk.

As she rises to give me a tour of the bedrooms, I can’t help but wonder if her sylphlike gait is a

souvenir from her days on the runway. “One summer, my parents insisted I do something productive with my time,” she chuckles, as we enter the primary bedroom where a custom canopy bed takes centre stage against a custom Kalamkari-on-linen wallpaper. “We knew someone who was a choreographer and she would take me for these small-time shoots and events. My parents would chaperone me and come sit in the audience. It was really funny. Then, Elite [the modelling agency] came to India, and that changed everything.”

One thing led to another, and within a few months, she was shortlisted for Miss India. “I remember being really flippant about it. I had nothing to prove. I was travelling to all these exotic places and doing good work. I fought it for months, to the point where I flew for the first round to Mumbai and didn’t even take any clothes with me. My parents had to fly down to convince me to stay.” It was a moonshot, but their persuasion paid off. In 2006, she was crowned Miss India.

For the former model, the idea of creating her own nest in Delhi was rooted in a plural sense of purpose. “I won’t lie, the first few years in Los Angeles were hard,” she reflects. We’re seated by a hand-carved marble tableau in her limoncello-inspired balcony. “I worked in India till I was

**MAJESTIC TREASURES**  
Above, from left: A traditional hand-carved canopy bed takes pride of place in the guest room. Antique Jamawars find new life as dividers in Kapur’s living room. The chandelier was handmade by artisans in Rajasthan. Opposite page: Kapur greets the breeze by the mandarin tree in the balcony



Bikini, blazer, jeans: all LOUIS VUITTON





Shirt, trousers;  
both URA

*THE MODERN MAHAL*

*Above:* Kapur begins her day with pink-salt-infused lemon water and meditation. *Opposite page:* A bespoke green sofa gives the living room the air of a traditional maharani's suite. The walls wear a midnight blue silk wallpaper designed by Kapur and Jha. The four-part pillar behind the dining table once belonged in a temple



“I visit India about five times a year and Kunal [Nayyar] tries to come at least thrice. We miss everything about being here. For 12 years, while *The Big Bang Theory* was on, he would only come for two months in the summer, and then for two weeks during Christmas”



28. I started working when I was 15. My family, my friends, my work, everything that I knew was here in Delhi. It's one thing to move as an undergrad going to college like Kunal did, but moving as an adult throws you a bit off balance.”

Luckily, she found that balance in 2016 with the birth of her luxury clothing line, Hensely. Exclusively sold on Moda Operandi, the label was hugely successful, but the competition was cut-throat. “Even though people loved it, it was touted against brands like The Row, Gabriela Hearst and Rosetta Getty, which commanded a loyal clientele. It was tough to be an honest brand while also trying to make a profit,” she shares. Recognising that it was unsustainable, she wound up the label in 2019, with zero regrets.

These days, Kapur and Nayyar have their hands full. They divide their time between Los Angeles, London and Delhi, and Nayyar is busy with his upcoming comedy drama, *The Storied Life Of A. J. Fikry*, where he plays the lead. “I visit India about five times a year and Kunal tries to come at least thrice. We miss everything about being here. For 12 years, while *The Big Bang Theory* was on, he would only come for two months in the summer, and then for two weeks during Christmas. He missed all these weddings and births. As soon as the show ended, we decided that we didn't want

to spend any more time away from our families. That was one of the biggest reasons why we wanted to build and have our own space, so we could come here more often,” she explains, adding that they decided to make London a halfway base so family and friends didn't have to make the long haul to Los Angeles to visit them.

The couple celebrated their 10-year anniversary in Los Angeles last year with an intimate backyard soiree for close friends and family (they love to entertain and have an open-door policy). “We initially contemplated doing it in Rajasthan, but then we were like, ‘What are we trying to do? Everyone we love is here.’ My parents couldn't make it, but it was still very intimate with people staying over,” she reminisces as we make our way back to the living room past patinated paintings by Suren Ganguly and Nandalal Bose, and an antique silver relief of Pashupatinath Temple passed down from her grandfather to her mother.

For now, the nomadic life suits Kapur and Nayyar. “I enjoy having multiple bases and Kunal does too,” she says. As for moving back to India for good, “I would never say never, but I also think it would be very hard to give up this set-up because now, with this home, it's given me that much-needed balance. I don't feel like I'm visiting, I feel like I'm coming home.”

*SWIRLS OF ECSTASY*  
Kapur twirls delightedly in her new home as she imagines all the happy memories it will rack up in the years to come