

A night photograph of a busy street in Negombo, Sri Lanka. The street is illuminated by various colorful signs and streetlights. On the left, there are signs for 'DAVID'S Rooms & Apartment', 'Beach Hotel', and 'WIND'. A person is walking on the sidewalk. In the center, a car is driving towards the camera with its headlights on. On the right, there is a 'TAXI' sign and a 'T. shop' sign. A person is standing near a motorcycle. The overall atmosphere is lively and urban.

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The Negombo Life

PARADISE REVEALED

design

STEFANIE WEGE- ALUWIHARE & SOPHIE WATKINS

Words by Khema Wijewardene, Photography by H.N Sampath

It's 3pm on a sunny Friday afternoon and I find myself heading to Chatham Street, in the heart of Fort, to meet Stefanie Wege-Aluwhare and Sophie Watkins, the creative minds behind Bon Vivant. An unusual alliance between Germany and France, it's clear from the easy back and forth between Steffie (an interior designer, among other things) and Sophie (a Feng Shui expert) that the two are old friends, as well as business partners.

Light and airy, the office feels spacious, the location in Fort shows foresight and I'll admit; I'm already won over. Given that Bon Vivant offers a holistic range of real estate services; from locating properties, to refurbishment, to interior design and Feng Shui, as well as offering relocation services like cross cultural training to expats moving to the island, the choice and design of their office speaks volumes.

Sitting down at a long wooden table, the two seem relaxed in their complimentary white outfits. Over cups of fragrant green tea we discuss the art of Feng Shui, expat living and why their motto is to, "Under promise and over deliver."

The Beginning

"I was trained as a personal assistant," says Sophie in her light French accent. "I'm very organized. Good at planning and networking and pretty business oriented. But after I met my husband I dropped my job as he worked

overseas." She tells a funny story about her first posting with her husband in Papua New Guinea and giggles as she talks about seeing men wearing only "covers for their willies," when she was researching the island, adding that the reality was obviously very different. Having studied linguistic programming and worked as a life coach while in Papua New Guinea, she first discovered Feng Shui when she was traveling in Beijing, but it wasn't until she moved to Sri Lanka, just 3 years ago, that she felt inspired to study the art.

"After 7 years in Asia, I found Sri Lanka very inspiring. Very spiritual," says Sophie with her usual animation. "It was actually Steffie who introduced me to Mark, who had learnt the art from Master Chan, the guru/Dalai Lama of Feng Shui." Steffie, who has been nodding along, adds, "They got on like a house on fire. According to Mark, Sophie had her own perspective, and a real intuition for Feng Shui."

Steffie's path to interior design, like Sophie's to Feng Shui, wasn't quite a straight forward one. She looks thoughtful when asked how she came to be a designer. "I had 2 souls in my chest as a kid. I used to draw, sew, embroider, knit, make dolls dresses, cut up my parents bed sheets and make dresses for myself. I acted and I sang." She pauses. "At the beginning I wanted to become an actress, but later I looked for a way to combine my love for business and my love of creativity."



Having studied advertising and communication, Steffie became a consultant for a strategic management consultancy. She describes working in Israel and Eastern Europe, saying that her experiences in these emerging markets taught her how to find a solution, even when she didn't have everything she needed. "I think that experience really prepared me for Sri Lanka," she laughs.

"I came to Sri Lanka for an ayurvedic holiday with a friend. It was meant to be a 3 week holiday, but I stayed 5. And then I came back twice more, before moving here on sabbatical in 2003. I never went back, except to pack my bags."

Having worked in her husband's business in Sri Lanka, using her expertise on international strategies, there's a twinkle in her eye as she says she decided to step back from that business because, "too many cooks spoil the broth."

"I wanted to get back to my creative roots," explains Steffie, "and it was actually while walking with Sophie in Independence Square that we came up with the idea for Bon Vivant."

The Process

It's often dismissed, Feng Shui, as somewhat hippy-ish bunkum, but there's more to it than many realise. An old wisdom and also a science, the art of Feng Shui has long been practiced in China.

"For me a house is like a person – any building, any office has a DNA," Sophie explains, "and using instruments like the loupan [an intricate type of Chinese compass] you understand the vibes and energies of a place. You get a feel for the positive and negative spaces within a house or office." She looks momentarily pensive, "It's like a blood test. Using the measurements of the loupan you can work out what is good and what the problems are."

As Sophie takes out an architect's floor plan, heavily marked with her own measurements, the discussion gets technical. She talks about the 'energy architecture' of a place, the flow of the qi and explains that the shape of a house is important. "When you don't have a proper square/rectangular house – there is a missing part, which is a bad thing. Obviously, that doesn't mean you need to rebuild your house, just take some measures to balance out the negative energy."

In their office, for example, they've used the wood element to balance out the fact that there's a missing piece, and they plan to break apart the stone, which currently sits in front of us on the table, and use its energy.

"Sophie knows the pure science of Feng Shui, but she is able to find a solution involving the home owners, without being too dogmatic," says Steffie. The two work together in this regard. While Sophie will do a consultation on improving the Feng Shui of a space, Steffie and she will work together to consider comprises





that will suit a client. For example, if the Feng Shui of a space calls for a fire element in one part of a house in Colombo, where a fire place is a little redundant, they will suggest alternatives using the colours, shapes or textures which represent the element and suit the space.

"You're never going to get a house which has 100% perfect Feng Shui. It's about increasing the positive energy, and reducing the negative energy."

The Future

Still a fledgling company, Bon Vivant seems to have the right attitude. "Under promise and over deliver," says Sophie, "that's what we aim to do." On an island where often there's a lot of talk, and substantially less action, it's a refreshing policy.

I ask the two about their plans for the future and they contemplate. "There's a lot

of components to the Bon Vivant business model, and design is just part of it," says Steffie. "We offer a building block system, like Lego, you can use one aspect of the business, or a range, or we can arrange everything – from finding the space to decorating it. We have a great team here."

"I think the other aspect of relocation services is also something we'll focus on," adds Sophie, her life coaching background coming to the fore. "We want to help other expats who are new in the country to settle in, not just to their house, but to this country. And as an expat woman myself, I know that expat women have to be creative and reinvent themselves, I want to help expat women find their own identity."

It's been an uplifting afternoon, and Steffie has the last line, "Sometimes it's just enough to really want something and to just say it and go for it. Rather than analysing just be positive."