

LUCKY AND LOCAL

by Verne Maree; photography by Hart Tan, Tomato Photo



I first met Ayse and Richard Davies some nine years ago, when they firmly believed they were here for the usual “couple of years” and would return to New Zealand after that. Then along came Emma (now 7), Toby (5½) and Ben (3).

When they finally realised that they were here for good – and really should buy their own home – they had already invested in property back in Wellington, so it took a few more years to make it all happen.

Far Out

It's understandable that newly arrived expats generally want to live in a central and convenient location. Living here for a few years and experiencing different neighbourhoods, however, tends to extend the borders of your comfort zone and open up new horizons.

The Davies started off in a Jurong flat, near the Cold Storage headquarters where Ayse worked as deli buyer for nine years.

“That was just a bit *too* far out and *too* local,” she admits. “There were no other expats in the area at all – no mums and tots playgroups to join. I felt a bit isolated.”

Ridgewood condo in Jelita was their next move – a lovely, family-oriented place where they all made friends, recalls Ayse.

Time to Buy

Good Luck Gardens is in Toh Tuck Road, beyond the end of Upper Bukit Timah; not a neighbourhood traditionally favoured by expats. But it's very close to Ayse's workplace and a five-minute walk from Emma's local school, Bukit Timah Primary. The boys are conveniently catered for at Innate



Montessori. It's poor old Richard who suffers the commute via bus and jam-packed MRT train to his office in Raffles Place. Lucky for some, as they say.

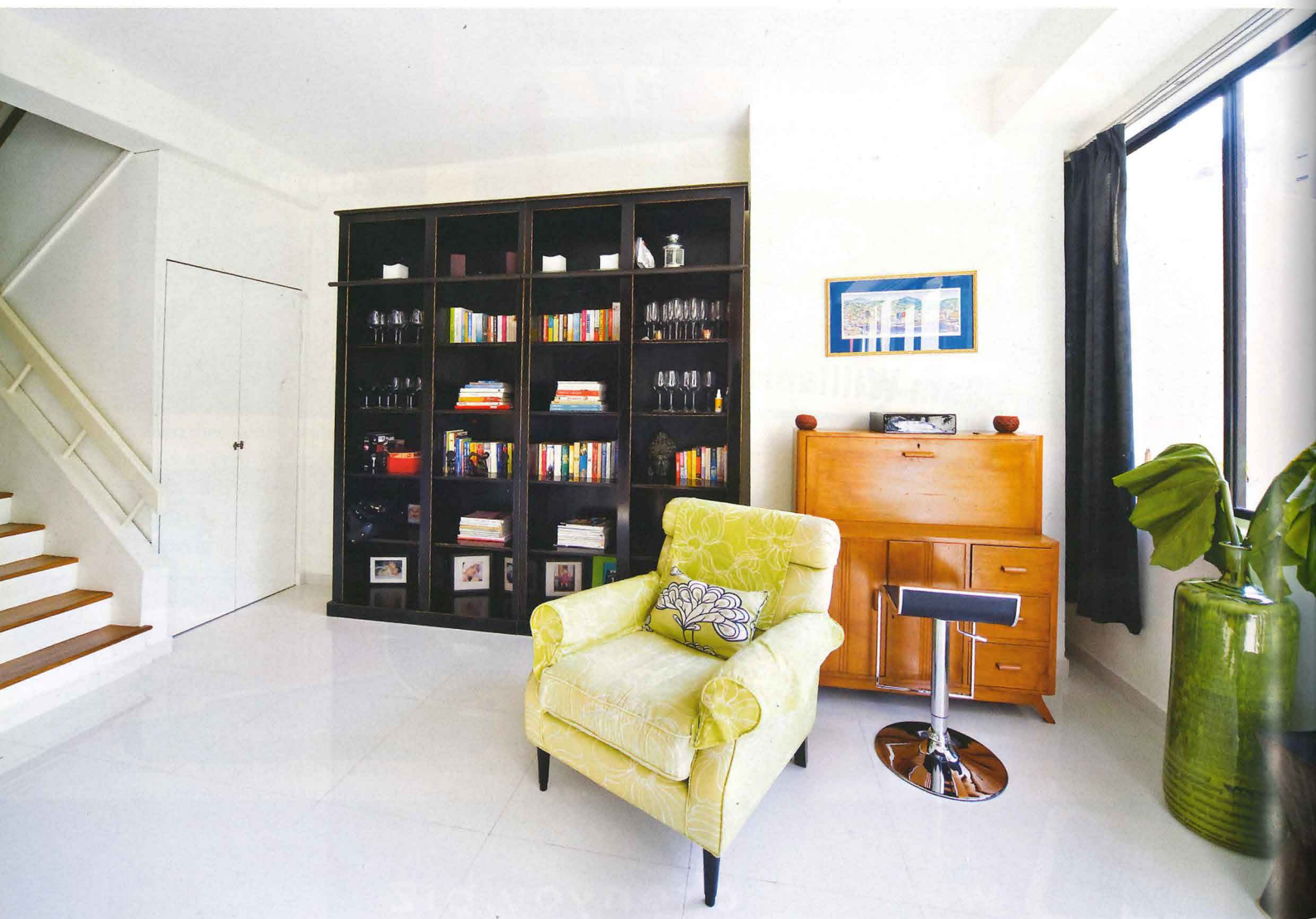
"We looked around for a few months, and had made an offer on another condo," says Ayse. "Thank goodness it was turned down. This place wasn't even advertised. We saw it at noon, put in our offer at 12.30pm, and before the sun had set we were drinking champagne."

"This property feels like a house, because it's on two levels and has some outdoor space;

but it also has condo facilities, including a playground as big as a football pitch. We wanted the bedrooms to be upstairs, so that we could have friends around for dinner while the children are safely asleep upstairs."

As a grateful recipient of more than one of Ayse's outstanding dinners (I highly recommend her garlic-and-rosemary roast lamb), I can confirm how well this works. But has she forgotten that just about all children will creep halfway down the stairs to eavesdrop on grownups' mystifying late-night conversations?

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Good Design

When architects get too fancy with awkward split-levels and artistic double-height ceilings, you tend to lose out on usable space. As Ayse says, this 2,000-square-foot double-storey property is intelligently laid out to maximise the living area.

"It was truly horrible when we bought it," she declares; but looking at the "before" photographs, I tell her I've seen far worse.

And we agree that renovating property in Singapore is a doddle. They're geared for it here; people do it all the time. Anyone who has suffered the horror of having a home in England renovated – all those spotty builders' cracks, endless cups of tea and interminable delays due to rain – will *really* appreciate the difference.

"We used designer Djohan Arifin Chen to run the entire project. Our extensive renovations included gutting the ground level, and everything was completed in seven weeks as promised. Our weekly on-site meetings went like a dream, we

had not one delay, and the guy was always so damn nice. He understood that both Richard and I hold down busy jobs, and don't have time to wander through a tile showroom, so he'd bring me a selection of three to choose from. Perfect!"





Interior Décor

"I wanted everything really modern, open-plan, clean and simple, so we have a lot of white." Aren't white sofas a problem with three youngsters in the house? Apparently not. "Biggie Best (Danovel) custom-made them with removable covers for us, and it's so easy to wash or even bleach them. It's the *green* chair

that's more of a problem to keep clean."

Fortunately, all the furniture that Ayse and Richard bought a few years ago translated well to their new home. Prior to that, they had stayed in fully furnished apartments.

"Designer Wendy Smith helped us with the décor; we bought all our furnishings through her.

"I have to sell one of the coffee tables, and I can't decide which. The black one from Just Anthony goes really well, but I also love the brown one from Asiatique." For the moment, the nest of two coffee tables is the children's favourite TV-watching perch.

A set of three paintings from Art for Art's Sake complements the dining room décor, which is



dominated by a massively framed mirror from Xtra in Park Mall. Ayse is bothered by the bareness of the smaller wall behind a splendid red buffet (from Lim's) topped with a pair of gorgeous candelabra – "I need to go to Bali," she declares. Don't we all.

Also from Xtra is a huge shelving unit that covers a living-room wall. It came with a ladder, which is tucked away behind it, out of sight. Two reasons for this: Richard thinks it's pretentious; Ayse says the boys would be up and down it like monkeys all day.

Up the Wooden Hill

Framing Angie framed the wonderful selection of mainly black-and-white family portraits on the stairwell; Janene Stokes, who has since left Singapore, was the photographer.

In the master bedroom on the second level, what was a balcony has been closed in to make a cosy corner for an inviting chaise longue. Another flight up, Emma's bedroom also lost its balcony in the remodelling process, and there's plenty of room for play.

Local Schools

How is Emma coping at a local primary school? Very well, says Ayse. Government schools provide an excellent educational foundation, and Bukit Timah Primary has a good mix of pupils; Emma is not the only foreigner.

"Her reading is phenomenal, and already I don't really like to have to help her with her maths homework," Ayse admits. Emma is learning Mandarin as her "mother tongue" option: a great opportunity. And she's clearly just one of the kids: when we visit her



pink palace, she's ensconced with two cute-as-a-button girls from next door, all playing with their bottle-blond Barbies.

The boys are doing fine, too. Their mother says she only realised that Toby could read when she was too busy for a minute to help him find a game he wanted to play on TV; he followed the words on the screen and found it himself. Her only worry right now is how Ben will react when his adored big brother starts proper school next year.

It's difficult to pinpoint the children's accents, I say. Their British mother's eyes widen in something akin to horror: "Sometimes it's dreadfully Singlish, but it changes depending on who they're speaking to."

I suggest that it may be a good thing to have an accent that's not easy to identify; who in England would ever know what the influence was?

"I'd know!" she retorts. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS

Asiatique
14-5 Dempsey Road
6471 1853

Danovel, Biggie Best
Tanglin Shopping Centre #02-11
19 Tanglin Road
6235 5020

Framing Angie
Holland Road Shopping Centre
#03-02
211 Holland Avenue
6466 0800

Just Anthony
379 Upper Paya Lebar Road
6283 4782

The Design Ministry
178 Joo Chiat Road #02-02
6344 0178

Xtra
Park Mall #B1-01
9 Penang Road
6336 0688

Design Intervention
Wendy Smith (designer)
75E Loewen Road, Tanglin
Village
6506 0920