

MADNESS AT THE MANSION

Last month saw one of London's most expensive property deals, involving the gilt-and-marble pile now known as Royal Mansion. Gorbachev was flown in to toast the deal with Simon Cowell and Sinitta. Hosting the event was the glamorous Yassmin Ghandehari, daughter-in-law of the elusive new owner, and self-styled developer of the lavish, but exhausted, 30,000 sq. ft. behemoth. Welcome to the house of fun, says **Helen Kirwan-Taylor**.

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The taxi driver who delivered me to 46A The Bishops Avenue, newly renamed Royal Mansion, did a double take. 'Is this a movie set?' he asked. With a Bentley parked on one side of the house and a Ferrari on the other, the neo-classical pastiche could easily be mistaken for a facade from the set of Dallas. Royal Mansion, now referred to as 'Top Whack', in reference to its previous owner, the Turkish businessman Halis Toprak, has just fetched the record UK price of £50 million through estate agent Trevor Abrahamsohn of Glentree International. According to Abrahamsohn, the owner is a 75 year old Kazakh property billionaire called Hourieh Peramam who plans to spend another £30 million on renovations. Overseeing the work is her daughter-in-law, 33 year old Yassmin Ghandehari who, as I stand outside the gate, is being photographed in a multitude of designer frocks inside.

Billionaires don't open their own doors, so to greet me there is a mysterious Middle Eastern man (he won't say where he's from) in a pinstriped suit and bow tie simply known as Ray. He is Mrs Peramam's financial advisor. I am ushered into a hall the size of a football pitch with a vast orchid display. We then move into a huge drawing room with parquet floors, marble fireplaces and rococo mirrors. Adjacent is a dining room complete with a 20ft. table covered with a gold embroidered tablecloth. The decor is what you would expect on Millionaires' Row, where neighbours include the Sultan of Brunei and Saudi Royals.

Everything is gold-leafed, gilded or plated. What isn't gold is made of marble. There is an entire marble Turkish bath for 20 in the basement. The house also has a gold-mosaic indoor pool with its own glass bridge, a 3,000 sq. ft. master bedroom and four kitchens. Though the acreage looks modest (only two) they intend to squeeze in a helicopter landing pad (hydraulic, of course). The current plan is to add another 10,000 sq. ft. to the 30,000 sq. ft. house and rip out most of the decor. They need the extra footage to add a cinema and a squash court among other things. Ray explains: 'We want to further enhance the splendour of the house.'

Everything is nonetheless spanking new because the previous owner spent

seven years building his fantasy house but only lived here for days before his bank was seized by the government.

Because he was in dire straits financially, Toprak put the house on the market for around £30 million. Sometime between being recalled to Turkey in 2001 and last January, the sale price climbed up to £50 million. To celebrate this triumph, Glentree hosted a party at the end of January for 450 people – including guest of honour Mikhail Gorbachev and the new owners – in the house. Lashings of champagne and caviar were served. A guest at the party described it as 'very odd with strange guests like the runner-up in X Factor and lots of property surveyors and journalists'.

Lakshmi Mittal lives next door, his house, the Summer Palace, is clearly visible from the garden of Royal Mansion, through which runs a stream that teems with rats.

Hourieh Peramam and her family, I am told, travel in their own Falcon jet and have properties in Dubai, Monaco, New York and the South of France. The whole empire is thanks to machinations of the diminutive Mrs Peramam, who has five daughters and a son. But it is her daughter-in-law Yassmin, who lives several doors away with her ten month old daughter Syna, who is the apple of her eye. It is Yassmin's duty to renovate as many houses as her mother-in-law needs, Ray explains.

Mrs Peramam left her native Kazakhstan at 17 and walked on foot to Iran where she and her family lived in a refugee camp. She married a wealthy Iranian doctor, who was ostracised for marrying a non-Muslim and forced to teach in schools to earn money. She started her empire by buying the house next door. When her husband wanted to buy a car instead, she threatened divorce. Her son Sasan, a tall and polite fellow with faltering English, who apparently runs the venture capital side of her empire, described her as 'very tough.... rides a horse without a saddle kind of woman'.

Mrs Peramam shunned polite society (she has very few friends, her son tells me) and travelled the world doing deals. 'She is brilliant,' says Ray. 'She has the knack to see things. The initial act of deprivation is such a motivation. Once you lose everything you obtain an innate ability to rise. The entire family understand the factor of time. We have 38,000 seconds of credit per day. If you don't use them, they are taken away from you.'



As we wait for Yassmin, Mrs Peraman arrives with her brother. There is much bowing and hand-kissing by her staff, but no introduction. She is tiny and doesn't look much like an oligarch: she reminds me of my Russian grandmother.

The majestic and bubbly Iranian-born Yassmin suddenly appears in jeans and patent leather boots, putting her at about 6ft. 2in. She has been married to Mrs Peraman's son for 13 years (they met in LA). We sit down on gilded chairs with trays of sandwiches on silver platters. Her sister and mother, both slim and immaculately dressed in obviously expensive clothes, are seated at the opposite side of the room not really listening, but not doing much else either. Ray sits between Yassmin and me. It's all awkwardly formal, more reminiscent of a state visit than a decorating chat. Yassmin tells me she attended the Inhbald School of Design and Central Saint Martins, where she studied art history. Though she has never technically held a job (but has 15 people working for her), she now looks after her mother-in-law's enormous real estate portfolio.

'For this particular house, I want to create a new concept. I want it to be very Yassmin,' she says, flashing a rock the size of a dice. 'I want to mix modern with 18th century. I want each bedroom to have a national theme and be designed by the top designer from each of those countries. In the entrance, I want to have limestone with semi-precious stone.' Yassmin renamed the house 'Royal' (it was Toprak Mansion before) because 'that means quality,' she says. The new look means that the two fireplaces on either side of the room will have to go, even though they each cost £18,000. The gilded chandeliers are also doomed, shortly to be replaced by modern Venetian plum colours. The Turkish bath – headed for the morgue – will be replaced by treatment rooms and a beauty salon.

Yassmin is clearly not used to the interview process. She is warm and gracious but after each answer, she folds her hands, smiles and waits. I feel like I am interviewing beauty pageant hopefuls in Kazakhstan. Stillness envelopes the room. Everyone apart from me seems very comfortable with this, including the maid, wearing a headscarf and a faintly tatty skirt, standing to attention nearby.

Ray prompts her. 'Yassmin's interests are philanthropy and shopping,' he says, reading from a sheet. She won't tell me which charities she supports ('That would be unfair,' she says). She tells me there will be another celebrity-filled event at the house in March but it would be too 'mean' to mention which of her famous friends is coming. Ray prompts her again. 'Hobbies?' 'I love food,' says Yassmin. 'I am a very good cook. I like to shop at Alaia and Chanel. I would have loved Coco Chanel. She would have definitely done one of my rooms.'

'Now restaurants,' says Ray. 'Yassmin likes dim sum. She likes Hakkasan but she thinks the best food is Mosimann's. She likes to have afternoon tea at the Mandarin Oriental.' Yassmin gives him a nod of approval. Then her sister walks over, stands next to us like a soldier and announces that Yassmin has a meeting and must be off.

'I hope you have enough,' says Yassmin, tossing her mane and not offering so much as an e-mail address. She has the star routine down pat.

A moment later, Ray asks me: 'Has Yassmin discussed her 25 bespoke Birkin bags?'

We continue the tour. I start climbing the stairs to see the upstairs and am politely told off. 'That's private,' says Ray. As I gather my coat to leave, I enter the anteroom where Mrs Peraman is sitting on a sofa watching the packing up of the designer gowns by Yassmin's mother. Mrs Peraman is dressed in grey trousers and a cashmere sweater and is holding a Louis Vuitton handbag.





No one speaks. I go over to introduce myself but she looks at me blankly. ‘She doesn’t speak English,’ says Ray. I change to Russian. Also a blank. ‘Mrs Peramam is under strict instructions never to speak to the press,’ says Ray uncomfortably. He then translates something into what I assume to be Farsi. I am ushered out by Yassmin’s very sweet husband and Ray, and we say our goodbyes. I am tempted to hug them all. As soon as I get home, my head starts to spin. I left with no business cards, just a mobile number. The press clippings all referred to Mrs Peramam as a billionaire, but says who? Ray? I asked him this later and he insists that Mrs Peramam has been incorporated in Switzerland for 25 years, and although she doesn’t speak any European languages is fluent in Turkish, Kazakh and Azari (an Iranian dialect). According to Forbes magazine, there are 946 billionaires in the world of which a few come from Central Asia. All those private jets and homes that billionaires collect mean they move around. Someone somewhere has entered into some business with them, made some transaction, drawn up contracts, hired lawyers, lived next door, shared a housekeeper. I called my brother, a financial journalist who operates in that part of the world. ‘We’re curious too,’ he said. ‘Never heard of her.’ Another journalist I contacted, a specialist on the former Soviet Union, had already posted the following on the web: ‘Who is Horelma? I’m no slouch on Kazakhstan wealth, and I’ve never heard that name. Neither have any of a multitude of friends who have emailed asking about this fellow. What nationality is Peramam? It’s definitely not Kazakh, or any other Turkic nationality I’ve heard of. Not Slavic. Not Korean. Not German. Why does this woman never speak? How did she cross one of the most secure borders in the world during Stalinism?’

We all agree that billionaires who travel in wealthy Iranian circles abroad and do multiple deals across the world tend to speak fluent everything. They also tend to know each other.

In the 15 emails I sent to everyone I know in the property world – including a lawyer acting for a billionaire Iranian in London – no one had heard of her. Billions can easily be moved from off-shore company to off-shore company, but the trail – the bankers, lawyers and the financial advisors – operates like you and me. They have last names and business cards. But says a wealthy friend: ‘Who says it’s Mrs Peramam running the empire and not 15 other people acting on her behalf? She may have made a few bob and then cleverly invested it.’ The house, says, Ray, was bought in a series of off-shore deals. According to my husband, the reason billionaires remain billionaires is because they don’t do deals like the rest of us. Finally an email came through from a friend, a wealthy member of the London Iranian community. Someone in London has indeed crossed paths with the Ghandeharis. ‘Yes, I’ve seen them on the party circuit, but can’t profess to know them,’ she says. They were an unknown quantity until this flashy purchase.’

There are a number of theories being expounded in London about just who these people really are. One is that Mrs Peraman, via Yassmin, may be inventing herself as the Iranian version of Candy & Candy and is planning to flip the house in a few months. But why the current media blitz? Shouldn’t it wait until Royal Mansion is ready?

Another theory is that all the media may be part of an intricate plan to launch the family into society. But in billionaire circles, you don’t need to arrive because everyone is already chasing you.

Some are even wildly suggesting that this could be some kind of marketing exercise – an idea vigorously denied by both Ray and Glentree International. Or maybe it’s a case of Yassmin wanting to be famous. In my mother’s day, girls were launched into society via glamorous balls. Nowadays, you front a reality show or open your closet to onlookers. I like the idea of Mrs Peramam riding bareback and escaping Soviet Russia on foot at 17, then a few years later, launching a billion-dollar empire just like that. From Kazakhstan to Royal Mansion in less than 50 years: what a story.