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A Fine Case In Point

A small company in Kolkata is creating cigar cases that have caught the world's attention.



SINCE 2000, A SMALL company operating from a quaint British-era *haveli* in Alipore, Kolkata, has been handcrafting an innovative collection of cases for storing one's cherished Cubans safely and in style. With several patents pending, glowing reviews from such esteemed publications as *Cigar Aficionado*, and Hollywood stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger touted to be among its clients, Andre Garcia cases today command considerable cachet among cigar smokers worldwide.

From the latest collection of crush-resistant carbon fibre cases to a sleek attaché capable of holding an iPad or a laptop alongside a box of cigars and accessories, to the patent-pending collections of zippered Pack & Go Travel Humidors and flat-top buffalo horn cases, Andre Garcia's range is vast and impressive. The sturdy cases are made with such premium materials as Bavarian bull leather and carbon fibre, and feature interiors made with breathable Spanish cedar imported from Brazil. The company's diverse collection includes 1- to 40-finger cases, attachés and totes crafted to hold cigars of varying ring gauges and sizes, from

seven-inch Churchills to tiny cigarillos. Some, such as the St. James cases, even boast a sliding feature that allows owners to adjust its length according to the size of the cigar.

Andre Garcia co-founder Abhik Roy is the brains behind these elegant designs. The 40-year-old, a mathematics graduate from St. Xavier's, Kolkata, and an MBA degree holder, held a plum job with an Indian yarn company when the world of cigars exerted its pull on him. "I became interested in the subject while surfing the Internet and started studying the cigar industry. It was a kind of a hobby for me," he says, adding that his growing interest was co-related to his roots—his mother hails from a *zamindar* family and, Roy quips, "In earlier times, Bengali *zamindars* used to have a taste for good things."

He adds, "I realised that no one had a lot of cigar case designs...most of them were two- or three-finger only." Thus in 2000, Roy visited the Ambiente trade fair in Frankfurt, Germany, carrying with him a few of his own designs. A chance meeting with Robert Franzblau—founder-president of US's oldest mail order cigar company,

The Ludwig briefcase and the St. James four-finger case (shown in red leather) are among Andre Garcia's most popular designs.

Thompson Cigar—turned out to be a decisive moment. "He said you've a knack for product development...when you launch your own company, give us a call—we'll place the first order," says Roy, who took the advice to heart and began designing cases full-time from his 120-year-old ancestral home in Kolkata. For two years, he manufactured cases for companies such as Ashton Cigar, Thompson Cigar, Altadis USA and General Cigar Company, before finally taking the next logical step—along with brother Anindya, Roy launched his own label, Andre Garcia, in 2003 (the company is registered in the US).

In its first year, Andre Garcia managed to sell an impressive 1.6 lakh cigar cases, and has sold 70,000 to one lakh cases on average every year since. From a single craftsman in 2000, the company now employs 45, and its products are sold at such reputable tobacconists as JJ Fox in London, A La Civette in Paris, and Hajenius in Amsterdam.

Few in India have heard of the company, however, and Roy acknowledges this incongruity. "Indians primarily smoke cigarettes, not cigars," says Roy. "The US is our single biggest market, and we retail at the top 10 tobacco stores in the world. In India, our clients are mostly cigar connoisseurs from Bangalore and Delhi who have seen our products abroad." The name of the brand, too, is a tip of the hat to the company's primary markets. Roy says, "My brother and I were having coffee in Boston and thinking of a name that could be easily recognisable in Europe and the US. Diego Garcia is an American battleship and Andre is a common name in Europe, hence we decided on 'Andre Garcia'."

Of the more than 100 designs to date, the zippered, buffalo horn, and St. James cases as well as the Ludwig

briefcase have been among the most well received, says Roy. Unlike traditional designs with tops that can slide off, the zippered cases allow owners to keep their cigars extra safe. The briefcase is designed to be a travelling humidor—there is a removable pouch in the centre with a mesh pocket to hold a humidifier. Roy's latest creation is a series of 12 sliding-top cases crowned with camel bone and engraved with a sign of the zodiac.

Discerning cigar lovers looking for something more special may request bespoke cases in their choice of design, dimension, material, and even gold or silver tops. Andre Garcia also offers options for embossing monograms or phrases on leather either through laser or hand, at no extra cost. "Because we have our own manufacturing facility, we have a distinct advantage over other brands," says Roy. "We have had lovers who have got cigar cases with a Turkish accent, while some people have had 'Time and Friends' embossed on the cases."

Eight years since he decided to make the drastic leap into a world that was and still remains largely foreign to Indians, Roy has no regrets. "My father thinks I'm an idiot and wasting money," Roy says with a laugh. "[But] most of my decisions are based on passion, and cigars are definitely a passion for me." —GRIJA DUGGAL

GOOD TO KNOW: Andre Garcia cigar cases retail in India exclusively from The Chambers clubs at select Taj hotels, and are priced between ₹5,000 and ₹30,000. The company also makes a range of cigars manufactured in the Dominican Republic.

Andre Garcia, +1.978.7267.606, www.andregarciacases.com;
The Chambers, www.tajhotels.com



Abhik Roy has designed more than 100 cigar cases to date, of which the Zodiac collection (left, in black leather) and the carbon fibre cases (right foreground) are the latest.

BIZ BUZZ

When Hollywood action hero and two-time California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is tired and wants to relax, he reaches for his favourite cigar, lovingly kept in a cedar-lined case crafted in Kolkata.

Schwarzenegger uses Andre Garcia, the Rolls-Royce of cigar cases with the same Bavarian bull leather that goes into crafting the seats of Bentley, Maybach and Porsche. Porsche Leipzig plant chief financial officer Udo Cervellini uses an Andre Garcia cigar case himself, preferring it over Dunhill, Davidoff and Porsche Design.

If you're wondering what's so great about a cedar and leather cigar case being made in the city where all major denim brands like Levi's, Lee and Wrangler are manufactured, Andre Garcia isn't a foreign brand. The name that conjures up Spanish-Portuguese connection was coined by two Bengali brothers — Abhik and Anindya Roy — who hail from Kolkata.

"Andre Garcia happened at a Starbucks outlet in Boston," recounts Abhik, co-owner of the brand that retails in reputable tobacconists as JJ Fox in London, A La Cigarette in Paris and Hakenius in Amsterdam. "We wanted a name that cigar-smokers — primarily Americans and Europeans — could identify with. A name like Ganesha would not work. Andre is a common name in Europe. Garcia is also a very common surname in the continent though at the time we picked up Garcia from the American battleship Diego Garcia," he adds. The company, which was incorporated in the

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ABHIK ROY

US in 2003, shot into prominence after 2006 when Andre Garcia products began to be featured in leading cigar journals like 'European Cull', 'Cigar Aficionado', 'Robb Report', 'Vintage Luxe' and 'Smoke'. Few, however, know about the brand in India. "Indians smoke cigarettes," says Abhik, by way of an explanation. "The US is our biggest market. Our only clients in India are true cigar connoisseurs who have seen our products abroad."

A few years prior to that, Abhik had no clue about cigars. In 2000, the South Point and St Xavier's College alumnus had both feet firmly planted in the corporate world after doing an MBA when a chance meeting with Robert Franzblau, the founder president of America's oldest mail-order cigar company Thompson Cigar, changed his life.

"I was at the Ambiente trade fair in Frankfurt, showcasing cigar case designs that I had developed for the trading firm, when Franzblau came to the stall and asked who had developed them. When he learned it was me, he said I had a flair for product development and promised to place the first order if I floated my own company. It was at the fair that I had my first cigar. Over the next couple of years, I began studying the cigar industry. I soon realized there wasn't much innovation in cigar case designs, and that most of them were for two-three cigars," says the 44-year-old Abhik, who is based in Kolkata and manages product development and manufacturing. Anindya, three years his junior and based in the US, handles client development and sales.

At the Andre Garcia workshop located in a

Puff Masters

Two Bengali brothers have risen to become one of the biggest names in the business of making premium cigar cases, with their manufacturing unit in their hometown, Kolkata. **Subhro Niyogi** tells their story



British-era manor in Alipore, 30-odd artisans churn out 50,000-60,000 cases each year. Till 2008, the numbers were huge. The 250-odd artisans and workers made 1.5 lakh cases annually, supplying to companies like Ashton Cigar, Thompson Cigar, Altadis USA and General Cigar Co.

"When we started, we began supplying 3-, 4-, 5-, 8-finger (number of cigars) cases to Davidoff, Dunhill, Thompson, Cohiba, Macanudo, Swedish Match was one of the biggest customers. We helped them sell cigars in cases instead of boxes. As the business flourished, we minted money. The restrictions that European Union imposed in 2007, making it mandatory to label tobacco products against smoking hazards, killed the market. With only the US market left, we realized it was time to focus on premium products," Anindya says.

The move has paid off handsomely with its collection of crush-resistant carbon fibre cases to sleek attaches for carrying a box of cigars to zippered 'Pack & Go' travel humidors and flat-top buffalo horn cases being featured in some leading luxury journals.

"Fine stitching, plush hides and exotic horn and camel bone are the signatures for Andre Garcia's impressive range of cigar cases. Consider Andre Garcia cigar cases as functional totes for your smokes as well as possible



MAKE IN KOLKATA: (Clockwise from top left) Brothers Abhik Roy and Anindya Roy, the two co-owners of Andre Garcia; Abhik at the cigar manufacturing unit in the Dominican Republic; a batch of Andre Garcia cigars; workers at the cigar case manufacturing unit in Kolkata; and the finished cigar cases, ready for sale

conversation pieces at the cigar bar," wrote columnist Michael Mortelli in 'Cigar Aficionado'. The diverse collection includes one- to 40-finger cases, attaches and totes crafted to hold cigars of Churchills to tiny cigarillos. "Andre Garcia introduced cigar cases with

breathable Spanish cedar lining inside, along with the option to keep cutters and lighters and portable humidification. Others have subsequently copied us. I want to import real alligator hide next to make another line of luxury cases," Abhik says. Of its products, the zippered, buffalo horn, St. James cases and Ludwig briefcases are among the most well received. Andre Garcia is the only company that makes customized cigar cases for clients. Madhupati Singhania, the eldest son of industrialist Vijaypat Singhania, is one of them.

While the cases sell in the US and Europe between \$99 and \$999, the company also makes a range of cigars with the Andre Garcia label that are manufactured in the Dominican Republic for the India market. With very few cigar smokers in the country, Abhik has no illusion about making money from this line of business. He says it was passion that led to the Andre Garcia cigars.

"When I looked at the cigars available in India, they were either Cuban, which were very expensive and strong to the Indian palate, or Burmese cheroot that was neither premium, nor low and coarse. For Indians who grew up smoking cigarettes and not cigarillos, these were too strong. I wanted to give Indian customers a choice to make a selection," he reasons.

Abhik sources the filler from Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic to create a mild but complex smoke that has an easy draw and helps a smoother transition from cigarettes. Andre Garcia now boasts 45 varieties of cigars, right from 3.25-inch Cigarillo to 4.25-inch Puritos, Precut, Puritos Maduro and Shortie to 5-inch Robusto, 6-inch Toro,



6.5-inch Torpedo and 7-inch Churchill.

The Andre Garcia cigars retail at star properties like Falaknuma Palace, Umak Bhawan, Udaipur Palace, Taj Bengal and Taj Mahal, apart from clubs like Bengal Club, Royal Calcutta Golf Club and Calcutta Club. Among those who enjoy smoking Andre Garcia are Bengal home secretary Prasad Ranjan Ray, former Kolkata Police commissioner Prasin Mukherjee, Chamong tea owner Yash Lohia and Spencer's CEO Mohit Kampani.

"I know Abhik for 10 years. What impressed me right at the beginning was his absolute passion for the world of cigars. He is also the first importer of cigars made specifically for India. From our perspective, his cigars are top quality. He understands the subject perfectly. He also helps train staff and does sessions for guests. Like his cigars, he is an absolute delight," says Mohan Chandran, area director of Taj Hyderabad, who looks after the five properties in the city.

Oh, and here's one for Tolly buffs. Though actor Prosenjit has quit smoking, the cigar that he puffed on the sets of 'Baishe Srabon' was an Andre Garcia. "I was keen to have a cigar that did not affect my throat. Not only was the Andre Garcia cigar very good, the accessories they provided were excellent. In fact, in the ongoing Kamaleswar Chatterjee movie, I have a pipe all through. I insisted that it had to be an Andre Garcia, and Abhik had a pipe handmade in London from Greek briar," Prosenjit says.