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ENDLESS SUMMER

This thatched holiday home in the surfers' mecca of St Francis Bay in South Africa turned a series of simple buildings into the ultimate relaxing family experience

TEXT BY GRAHAM WOOD STYLING JEANNE BOTES
PHOTOGRAPHY GREG COX/ BUREAUX

Even if you're not a surfer, you've heard of "the perfect wave". But did you know that the term was coined in the South African coastal town of Cape St Francis? For those in the know, the classic 1966 surf film *The Endless Summer* follows two American surfers around the world in their quest to find every surfer's holy grail, the perfect wave. In the film, the surfers find it in Cape St Francis, peeling away endlessly along a deserted strip of beach paradise in the Eastern Cape. A voiceover by awestruck narrator and filmmaker Bruce Brown intones over the 16mm hand-held camera footage: 'I couldn't help but think of the hundreds of years these waves must have been breaking here. But until this day, no one had ever ridden one.'

Since then, Cape St Francis' waves haven't been neglected and the town has grown to become more than just a surf destination, however, it still retains that mythic charm. South African-born Fiona Ferguson has the happiest childhood memories of family holidays spent in the adjoining marina on the Kromme River. Its idyllic setting with beautiful canals and a wide river seem to represent nature at its best.

Her parents still own a house there, and she and her British husband, Mark, followed in their footsteps and bought a thatched bungalow in the marina. However, with four boys of their own, they decided that they needed a bigger house and found one along the river. 'We had friends who had a property nearby, so we had a sense of what that river lifestyle was like,' says Fiona. The river is also somewhat safer than the ocean for children to play in, and offered its own host of water sports and fun.

Cape Town Architect Bert Pepler, who Fiona and Mark brought on board to design their new house, has also been coming to Cape St Francis for years. He says his main idea was for the house to connect land to water.

Fiona saw a picture in a magazine of a wood-panelled house on the water, which acted as a starting point for her brief to Bert, which was fairly open. She believes that interfering with an architect's design often ends up compromising good ideas, so she suggested little more than open-plan, communal living ►



Large cork pendant lights hang over the long bespoke dining table. The Kristalia Elephant dining chairs are elegant but durable with wooden bases. The broad, oak plank flooring is saw-cut and creates a relaxed feeling, reminiscent of a weathered barn, while the roof is not dissimilar to an inverted boat hull.



Clockwise from above Architect Bert Pepler designed the brass fireplace with beautiful dovetail joint details; brass has also been used for the ironmongery and taps throughout the house. The light oak surfaces in the kitchen form the backdrop for the focus of the room, the purple island unit, while the black chandelier left from the previous owner remains as a tongue-in-cheek accent. On the deck, traditional Malawi chairs are painted acid yellow to add another pop of colour.



and play space, privacy and the all-important connection with the beautiful setting. Otherwise, she was happy to let Bert pursue his ideas. 'We barely changed his design,' she says, 'and he's created something really special.'

The long, narrow property the Fergusons found stretches between street and river. According to Bert, it's the last of the old properties. In fact, the house next door, set among established trees and wild vegetation spilling over the wooden boundary fence, is what he calls an 'old St Francis Bay bungalow'. The vernacular has its origins somewhere between a fisherman's cottage and Cape farm architecture and provided him with a useful reference point.

The St Francis Bay municipality also specifies certain architectural guidelines, such as building with white walls and pitched roofs in either thatch or slate. In addition to the aesthetic guidelines, regional environmental rules don't allow you to build on the dunes, which meant that the house had to be set back at least 20 metres from the river.

The walled entrance courtyard with gravel that crunches underfoot infuses the sense of arrival with a "Cape farm feeling". The simplicity and purity of the thatch roofs and bagged white

walls imparts a sense of place, while the curves of the thatch roof draw you in and through a series of courtyards towards the river view.

This series of parallel and perpendicular forms create what Bert calls 'little werfs', the local term for farm courtyards. These create varying degrees of shelter and privacy and integrate the indoor and outdoor spaces. 'Wherever you are in the house, I always want you to feel like you are connecting to the outside,' he says.

Each barn serves a different function: the first is a service wing, one is for outdoor entertainment, one for living and dining space and two are sleeping quarters. 'As the trees grow and create a canopy and greenery, it feels like the forest is working its way through the house,' says Bert.

This arrangement creates a variety of spaces and shelter from the wind. 'There are easterly and westerly winds, so between the courtyards there's a sheltered outdoor spot no matter which direction the wind blows.

Bert departed from tradition in one significant way. 'Thatch roofs normally rest on substantial brick walls providing stability and containment,' he explains. 'We wanted the material to do ▶



Left to right The guest bedrooms have lofts and window seats that double as beds for additional sleeping space. The master bedroom, furnished by Vogel Design, features a beautifully woven headboard designed by founder John Vogel.

something it doesn't normally do, by supporting very heavy thatch roofs on a series of columns, allowing the house to open up and feel light.' He wanted sliding glass doors to predominate, creating a feeling of transparency.

'So, the idea of thatched pavilions became the aesthetic,' he says. 'But you still need a sense of security – the feeling that the house is robust and strong. When the weather changes, you want to be able to close it up.' So he added wooden shutters that you can pull across, or slide away according to the weather and your mood.

With the doors open, you can walk from one courtyard all the way through the house and into the next courtyard almost without noticing the transition. At the same time you can close it up so you feel sheltered and contained. 'We have shut the sliding doors and lit the fire so it felt warm and cosy and in December, when it's hot, everything opens up, and even when you're inside you feel connected to the outdoors,' says Fiona.

Bert also tempered contemporary touches by sticking to simple and honest materials like wood panelling and bagged brickwork to create an understated, relaxed kind of luxury. 'A luxury in terms of lifestyle, not ostentatious but understated and simple,' she

adds. The reassuring bulk of the somewhat oversized bluegum (eucalyptus) columns and the raw wooden beams does the aesthetic work of grounding the materials.

'The broad oak plank flooring is saw-cut and creates the feeling of a weathered barn,' says Bert. In other areas, it is a simple tinted screed, which is easy to sweep when beach sand is walked into the house. He used poplar with a slight grey wash for the beams and ceiling. The natural, Scandinavian feel of the timber creates a neutral backdrop for the furnishings, where brightly coloured pieces can stand out. 'The brass details used extensively throughout pop out because they're set against a very neutral palette of finishes,' notes the architect.

AJ Bell and Carla De Fondaumiere of GDF Design Lab worked with Fiona on the interiors as she has a self-confessed eclectic taste. She happened to be travelling quite a lot during the time they were at work and chose a good deal of the furniture herself, so the furnishings reflect a diversity of influences. The guiding principle, however, was a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere that could accommodate family and fun and boisterous boys, and yet still be aesthetically pleasing. 'It's quite playful and fun,' says Carla, ▶



SLIDING GLASS
DOORS PREDOMINATE,
CREATING A FEELING OF
TRANSPARENCY

Above The bathrooms have a mix of modern and traditional design features, predominantly in white, brass and wood, but the overriding characteristic is simplicity. This bathroom is en suite with the master bedroom and maintains the inside-outside connection that the architect designed, with an outdoor shower and wild foliage.



'not over-designed.' Although there are aspects of bold colour, the interiors are simple and uncluttered. There are pops of brightness, seen in the vivid green of the Marcel Wanders' Cocktail chairs in the lounge and some statement designs, but overall the house remains unfussy.

The interiors also include a fairly even mix of imported and local South African designs. The indoor and outdoor dining tables are by Egg Design and Meyer von Wielligh respectively. Beauty Bureaus by Dokter and Misses (a Johannesburg-based design company) feature throughout the guest bedrooms, and benches and other designs by Laurie Wiid Van Heerden make frequent appearances. There are also key pieces by Vogel Design. In the master bedroom, for example, a bed by this brand features a beautifully woven bespoke cord headboard that evokes the geometries of traditional African patterning, while modern fabrics add contemporary flare. Easy-going local classics, such as the brightly painted Malawi chairs, keep it unpretentious.

They also reused a few items that were left behind from the previous owners, or were part of the original design. 'We repainted

a few traditional old wooden wardrobes in glossy colours,' says AJ, 'One is now acid yellow.'

In a whimsical touch, they also reused a large chandelier in the kitchen, which was an unlikely addition to the now contemporary, airy and wood-filled kitchen. 'We kept it there, tongue in cheek, in defiance of all the other good taste,' says Fiona.

A little like the use of timber throughout, which creates a sense of unity and calm, the bedrooms are all similarly kitted out. 'The colours are different, but most of the furnishings were the same,' says Carla. 'It creates a sense of coherence.'

The emphasis, as it should be, is on the experience: stepping out of the bedroom in the morning for a first cup of coffee; mornings spent on the river or at the beach. 'We have lovely lunches in that huge table. The river is absolutely magnificent, and constantly changing. Sometimes, when you wake up it's choppy, and the next time it's as still as glass. It's magical. For all its beauty and comfort, the house is minimal, and it's really liberating.'

● gdfdesigns.com

STYLE FILE How to get the look



Braided Rug Company utility basket
Amara, Dh169



Bamboo tray
Blanc D'Ivoire, Dh152



Bar stool and side table set
both Flamant, Dh436 and Dh3,760



Exotica shell necklace
Tribe, Dh690



Velvet chair
Maisons Du Monde, Dh2,065