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SWEETNESS AND LIGHT

Continuing our regular series on extraordinary houses owned by fascinating people to take over as your own, this month we track down the South African pad of a game-reserve architect

By Jane Broughton. Photographs by Elsa Young



PHOTOGRAPHS: FRA
LUANNE TOMS/FRA



Clockwise from this picture: Ben, the son of the owners of St Helier Cottage, south of Durban; a bathroom; a bedroom; the living room with a vase by Cécile & Boyd. Opposite, the pool and deck

Clockwise from this picture: Tweed, one of the family's two miniature schnauzers; the pool; a bedroom; the living room with Afra chair and Otto Hoffmann carpet



LESS THAN AN HOUR'S drive south of Durban, on the old coastal road that cuts through a lush, sub-tropical landscape, is a speck on the map called Widenham Beach. It's an almost deserted stretch of golden sand sandwiched between the warm Indian Ocean and a dune-belt of indigenous milkwoods, wild banana and silver leaf trees. The setting owes its unspoilt nature, in part, to the Port Shepstone–Durban railway line that chugs along parallel to the sea and has served as a deterrent to development. All that has sprung up along the ridge over the years are low-key cottages, the loveliest of which is the weekend bolthole of South African architect Joy Brasler and her husband, retail design CEO Lucien d'Avicé.

Joy has worked on some of the smartest game lodges in Africa, including the original Singita Lebombo, Wilderness Safaris' Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp in Namibia and Linkwasha in Zimbabwe. Her latest project is the Gorokwe Camp in the Okavango Delta, set to open this summer. But here she had free reign to create her own minimalist space. 'The

doors to open the rooms up to the elements. After levelling the internal floors, refitting the kitchen and bathroom, then adding a deep pool, the two couples didn't have the budget to do much else. Ten years later, though, with two children and a longing for more space, they bought out their friends and Joy set about transforming it.

The house now has a fun bunk room for kids, and two sophisticated bedrooms with grey, seagrass-covered walls. 'I'm a great one for taking a nap,' says Joy, 'so I designed the bedrooms as little snooze boxes. When the shutters are closed they become dark, shady cocoons against the harsh glare that bounces off the sand and sea. You can feel quite separate and peaceful in here, even when there are other people in the house.' For good measure, curtains are triple layered to include a hessian lining which also acts as a sound barrier. Behind the bedrooms are two bathrooms which open up to outdoor showers enclosed by cathedral-like, domed courtyards, overhung with climbers. Soft, dappled light filters through the greenery in the afternoons, while at night you can shower beneath the stars. Besides

Durban craftsman with whom she has worked for many years. The sun-bleached, white fabric is actually synthetic, but looks and functions like linen without the fade and stretch. It's very tolerant of sandy feet and soggy swimsuit bottoms. This is a beach house, after all, not a show home. Yet it is still full of impressive pieces: sculpturally beautiful vases and vessels throughout were sourced from Cécile & Boyd's interiors shop in Durban (the designers Joy turned to for the Singita projects).

The huge, stainless-steel-topped kitchen island is the heart of the house. With her busy architectural practice, Joy doesn't have the time or inclination in Durban to prepare things from scratch, but here the days tend to centre around cooking and eating. She pages through recipe books, and bakes with 10-year-old Stella, who has recently perfected an apple, almond and polenta cake. Joy is quick to add that Lucien cooks most of the meals, often roping in 12-year-old Ben to make fires. Lucien also turns out excellent slow-fermented sourdough bread and is a great forager from the sea,

THE WHOLE PLACE HAS BEEN DESIGNED LIKE A SWISS ARMY KNIFE, TO BE OPENED UP AND USED THEN FOLDED BACK AGAIN

south coast has always been slightly unfashionable,' explains Joy, which is a large part of its appeal for this hard-working, high-profile couple. 'It's incredibly private. We rarely run into anyone we know, which means I can pop to the local shops in my pyjamas with no qualms.' Property is still certainly more affordable here than on the more affluent stretches north of Durban, and creative design and media types have slowly started to buy houses in the area. 'We like to think all the cool people come south.'


When she first saw the low-slung cottage, almost 15 years ago, it was a less appealing proposition. But the uninspiring, Seventies-spec house, tucked into a panhandle on St Helier Road, shielded from its neighbours by thick scrubland, had an impossibly perfect widescreen view of the sea. Joy felt an immediate connection to the site. Thankfully, Lucien felt it too. On a complete whim, in partnership with good friends, they put in an offer and ended up buying a holiday house here. This was long before they even owned their own home in Durban. Straightaway windows were bashed out and replaced with French

providing clever cross ventilation, these wrought-iron domes also keep curious monkeys out. A self-contained guesthouse sits below the front lawn, with its own deck and sea view, accessed via a row of skinny steps that disappear into the grass. 'I wanted to create a special place for friends that would allow them to join us for meals whenever they want, but also to retreat to their own spot,' says Joy. 'It's like having a private little cave.'

Despite sleeping 10, the house isn't enormous. Lucien says it reminds him of a boat. 'Everything is ship-shape and has its place. From the gas bottles and solar-powered geysers to the washing machine and tumble drier, it's all hidden away behind sliding panels or doors – there when you need it, but out of sight when you don't.' Joy says she was inspired by a Swiss army knife when she worked on the layout: designing everything to be opened up and used as required, before being folded back again just as easily.

One wall in the living room is clad in crushed blue-grey stone from the local quarry at Scottburgh, and the sofas were designed by Joy and custom made by a

collecting mussels off the rocks and oysters from a bed right below the house which is revealed at low tide. Fresh fish is bought from a local supplier, and if anyone is feeling adventurous, they can dive for crayfish in season. Relaxed Sundays involve friends driving down from Durban for a barbecue lunch of elf fish and rock lobster. But according to Joy, 'anything tastes great here'.

On weekends when there are no visitors, the family takes morning jaunts down to the beach. Experienced divers know the area as the launch point for Aliwal Shoal, one of the world's top dive sites. Lesser known is a surf spot called Green Point – a brilliant right break, particularly when the wind blows from the south-west. Afternoons are less energetic, with everyone collapsing in the shade by the pool to read or play card games. 'There's something about this place that makes us all behave differently,' says Joy. 

TO RENT *St Helier Cottage sleeps 10 (six adults and four children) and costs from about £225 per night, available to rent through Perfect Hideaways (perfecthideaways.co.za)*