

Beyond THE SEA

A few simple decorating touches create a sense of home in this stunning light and airy coastal weekender

STORY ANNA McCOOE PHOTOGRAPHY CATH MUSCAT STYLING HELEN ADAMS



Homeowner Nikki Dunlop and her children, Mimi, two, and Pia, four, enjoy their outdoor entertaining area as often as possible. Considered landscaping and clever plant selection (opposite page) by Hugh Main at Spirit Level Designs has created an intimate outdoor dining nook. Resilient merbau decking and a rugged brick feature wall complement strappy bamboo (on left) and a hedge of dwarf lily pillies (right).



Limed oak flooring by Precision Flooring sets a wonderfully pale but warm tone in a spacious living area, while an oversized modular sofa, with Caleido fabric in Porridge by Warwick Fabrics and button detailing, provides a great spot for the whole family to relax. In such an open space, clever measures are required to subtly separate the different zones. A large artwork by New York-based artist Che Chueng overlooks the dining area (opposite page, left), which is further delineated by a low-hanging white pendant shade.

the facts ...

Who stays here? Decorator Nikki Dunlop; her husband Anthony, a financier, daughters Pia, four; Mimi, two; Nikki's father, brothers and their partners – everyone is welcome!
Style of house? A relaxed three-bedroom, three-bathroom, three-storey coastal home.
Where is it? On Sydney's Northern Beaches.

Blue skies will relax the most preoccupied of minds – and for the urban dwellers who stay in this balmy retreat, nestled between the harbour and ocean on a leafy strip of land 45 minutes from Sydney's CBD, the meandering drive out is better therapy than shiatsu. "There's something about driving to the coast, even with the kids in the back of the car, that really clears the mind," says Nikki Dunlop, a decorator whose family frequently vacations at the house. "When we pull up to the house on a sunny Saturday morning, we're already in holiday mode."

After the cathartic journey, the big oak doors fling open and Nikki and her family join her father Tony, who lives there during the week, to revel in the view. Each re-introduction to the house, with its artfully landscaped backyard, airy open stairwell and louvred windows that tunnel light between the floors, is really something special, says Nikki. "It's like a sudden burst of energy takes hold of us – 'we're here!'"

When Nikki and her father were looking to rent a regular weekend getaway, they hoped simply to find a good house on a good street – instead, they found a fairytale. The newly renovated home captured their hearts with its limed American oak floors, limestone

bathrooms and the aged merbau timber decks featured on all three levels. Architect Nicholas Graham, with the help of builder John Oxley, was to thank for transforming the original two-bedroom, two-level shack into the spacious, sun-drenched space the pair saw when they eventually signed the lease.

With the hard work done, Nikki's brief was to style the interior with clever touches to make the house feel like home. "The challenge was finding a style to suit all three generations who stay at the house," she says. "Dad's into neutrals, but my girls love pink and we're all beach people. In the end, I think the style chose itself."

The home's cool mix of resort-style informality and Hamptons-inspired sophistication entices Nikki's whole family – father, husband, children, brothers, their partners and friends – to gather here at every opportunity. The social hotspot is the living room, which Nikki has decorated in soothing neutrals. An L-shaped sofa from Zest – accessorised with olive cushions from Orson & Blake and custom-made cushions made from Rolyston House Boudoir fabric in Ivory – together with votives from Papaya, create the perfect backdrop for family gatherings. >



we love ...

mirrored shelving

In a previous life, this corner in the living area was a wasted space which no-one knew what to do with. Now, thanks to a mirror-backed storage wall, the corner is a bona fide reading nook and home to the family's favourite heirlooms. Not only does the mirror bounce light around the room, it makes you feel as though you're peering into a whole other room. Builder John Oxley put up a frame clad in MDF (later coated in polyurethane) and called in a glazier to measure and cut the mirror to suit. Expect to pay around \$2000. Contact John Oxley Constructions on (02) 9939 0939.



A deep-set bath, timber-veer finishes and stacks of natural light keep this bathroom (above, left) fresh. Mimi and Pia (above) play in a lighthearted room custom-designed for little girls, with just the right amount of pretty pink. In the kitchen (above right and opposite page), instead of a splashback above the sink, architect Nicholas opened up the room with bi-fold windows, to let in more light and reveal the stunning vista of Norfolk Island pines. A stone-topped mobile unit on castors does double-duty as a buffet table when entertaining.



< Large sliding doors open up the living areas. “Sunday lunch usually starts on the deck and we gravitate inside as the evening chill hits. It’s a seamless transition – our late lunches have been known to go all night,” says Nikki.

The quiet achiever during these buzzing social get-togethers is the kitchen, located in the same open-plan space just off the loungeroom. With satin finish Bristol Bleached Sand polyurethane cabinetry providing ample storage space and integrated appliances – cleverly concealed to all those except the few who guess they’re there – it’s understatedly chic. In fact, the slick under-mounted sink is the only real reminder that the kitchen is functional, too.

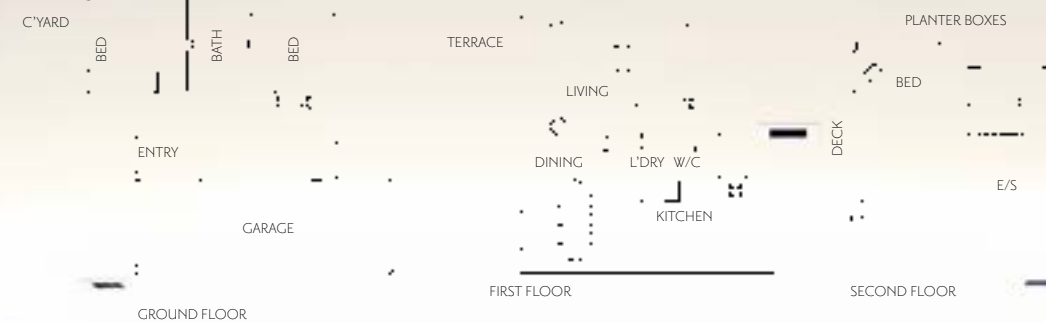
Nikki continued the classic-but-casual theme in the downstairs bedrooms, upholstering bedheads with a white and taupe striped cotton from Bargain Upholstery Fabrics and accessorising with matching cushions. “I’m big on stripes, they really add something extra,” she says. To make her little girls feel at home, Nikki added just a dash of pink on some vintage fabric canvases she made by hand.

On the home’s top floor, her father’s living area is the ultimate retreat – especially when the house is full of guests. This additional level boasts a water feature, a living screen of plants providing privacy from neighbours, a home office nook and a drop-dead gorgeous limestone bathroom.

So does this picture-perfect mini-break destination make Monday-itis even harder to bear? Nikki shakes her head. “A nice weekend does wonders for the mood. I find I never mind tackling the week ahead when I’ve had such a nice time here with my family.”

Contact Nikki Dunlop Interiors on 0405 332 335; architectural firm Nicholas Graham + Associates on (02) 9698 6862 or visit www.nicgraham.com.

ILLUSTRATION WWW.KENZIEDSIGN.COM





Cleverly positioned, this top-floor master-bedroom retreat has no door, allowing large double-height louvred windows to flood the room with dappled sunlight. Featuring vast built-in wardrobes, ensuite, a cute study nook and overlooking a water feature (below, left), the room serves as a welcome escape from the family hubbub. In the main bathroom (opposite page), easy-to-wash limestone floors are both practical and beautiful, while a deep, freestanding tub is perfect place to soak away an afternoon.



inside story

If this home were a book it would be ... Nikki: "Island Life: Inspirational Interiors (Stewart, Tabori & Chang) by India Hicks and her husband David Flint Wood. It's the ultimate escape fantasy about packing up and moving to the Bahamas – in style. And there's just something about this house that makes me feel the same way."

Your favourite spot? "The upper bedroom, which has a great view – there's nothing nicer than being up there with a good book, it's divine."

Quintessential experience in the house? "Afternoons on the deck. We have a big family and everyone is always inviting friends down. After a morning swim, we all gravitate to the deck for a glass of rosé. The afternoon sun is great there."

What's your best tip for living between houses?

"Have double of everything, especially sunscreen, swimmers, towels and toiletries. The less you have to pack and unpack, the better."

What is your favourite store?

"Papaya. Everything in the store is so calm and neutral. It really suits the style of this place."

