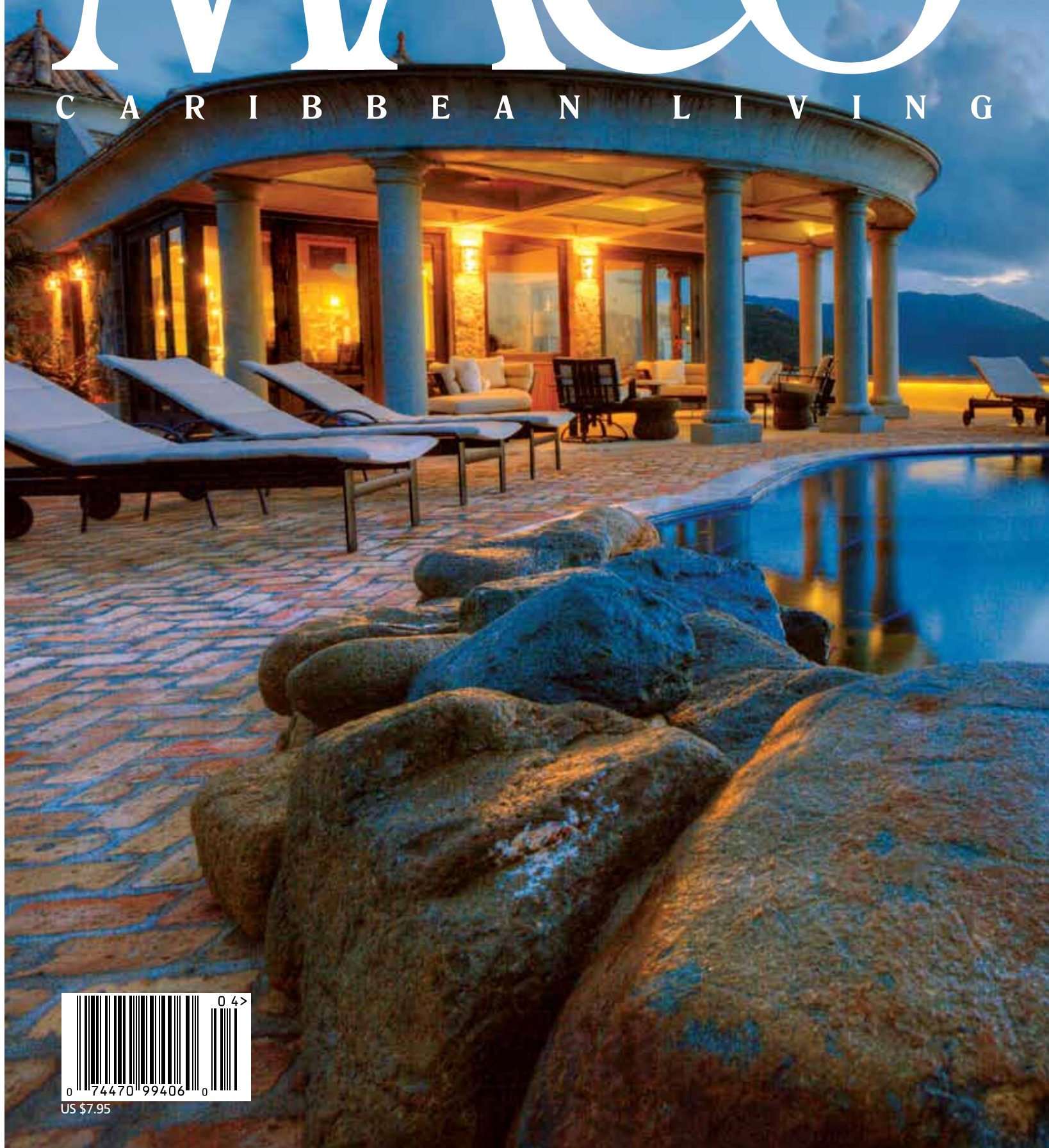


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THE STORY OF MAREA, A FIVE-BEDROOM VILLA ON THE ISLAND OF ST JOHN'S MOST DRAMATIC HOME SITE, BEGINS WITH A BOY AND HIS LOVE OF SNORKELLING. ANDREA MILAM TELLS IT ALL HERE IN MACO, VOLUME 14 ISSUE 4. TO SUBSCRIBE, CLICK THE COVER ON ABOVE.

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ends of the earth

WRITER ANDREA MILAM
PHOTOGRAPHER STEVE SIMONSEN

YOU CAN SEE CLEAR INTO FOREVER FROM THIS WINDSWEPT PENINSULA IN ST JOHN.
AND THEY CALL THE HOUSE (NOT THE WIND) MAREA

BELOW Landscaping provides a natural buffer for the home's bedrooms, which are lined up along the site's eastern edge

BOTTOM A trellis-covered walkway joins Marea's bedroom pods with the sunrise terrace

RIGHT Lush landscaping creates feel of garden walkway

THE STORY OF MAREA, A FIVE-BEDROOM VILLA ON THE ISLAND OF ST JOHN'S MOST DRAMATIC HOME SITE, BEGINS WITH A BOY AND HIS LOVE OF SNORKELLING.

The young child's parents, in the late 1990s, brought him again and again to a small stretch of sand on Ditleff Point on the island's south shore. While the boy plied the gin clear waters off the beach at Ditleff, his parents would revel in the undeveloped peninsula's rugged, windswept beauty.

When news reached the boy's parents that Ditleff was to be subdivided and developed, they knew that the peninsula's impressive point, sculpted by millennia of waves washing its shores and winds carving its dramatic landscape, would become the site of their island home.

"I was really upset to hear they were developing Ditleff Point," recalls Marea owner Michael Skurnik. "My wife Judy and I rushed out there and saw it was true, and our hearts sank a little bit. But then we saw the infrastructure and what a beautiful job they'd done. We started visiting the bluff and, realizing that it was going to be purchased some day by someone, we started to think, 'Maybe it's possible we could be that someone.' I guess in the back of my mind,





WE STARTED VISITING THE BLUFF AND, REALIZING THAT IT WAS GOING TO BE PURCHASED SOME DAY BY SOMEONE, WE STARTED TO THINK, 'MAYBE IT'S POSSIBLE WE COULD BE THAT SOMEONE'

I wasn't thinking about building a house; I was thinking about preserving the property. The idea was that if someone was going to do it eventually, we figured it might as well be us."

By the time they purchased the 4.13-acre point, New York natives Michael and Judy Skurnik were already well-acquainted with St John, the smallest of the three main U.S. Virgins. They'd vacationed there for years and even bought a home on the southwestern side of the island.

Marea's design was conceived during a charrette, an intensive and interactive several days-long process of meeting, sketching, and bouncing ideas back and forth with the Skurniks' architect, Michael L. Oxman. During the charrette, it became apparent that the site itself would give rise to the home's footprint.

"Although the lot was quite large, the buildable area was extremely small," explains Oxman.

Aside from the lot's unique terrain, complete with 100-foot cliffs cascading down to the sea below, Marea's design would also be constricted by covenants put in place by the Jackson Hole Preserve, a non-profit conservation organization established on St John in the 1940s by Laurance Rockefeller.

"Part of the Jackson Hole requirements were that on these ridge locations, they didn't want you to go above a certain height, which in this case would make Marea a one-storey house," says Oxman. "That became an incredibly important factor in the organization of the plan."

Throughout the years that Michael and Judy Skurnik brought their son to snorkel at Ditleff, and during visits to their home site after its purchase, it became apparent to the couple that the point's premier spot was what they referred to as the saddle—a relatively narrow space that looked both east and west.

"That became, in many ways, the most important aspect of the lot, and very quickly we came to the conclusion that that's where the public spaces needed to be," explains Oxman.

LEFT Waterfall spills into Marea's pool, adding to dramatic beauty of home at end of Ditleff Point

“MAREA IS AN ITALIAN SEAFOOD RESTAURANT, AND IT’S ONE OF OUR FAVOURITES,” EXPLAINS MICHAEL. “THE WORD ‘MAREA’ MEANS ‘THE TIDES’ IN ITALIAN, AND SEEING AS HOW WE HAVE WATER VIEWS ON ALL SIDES, WE THOUGHT IT WAS APPROPRIATE

The grand great house sits high on the saddle, from which views of sunrise and sunset; the imagery of the island’s gently sloping verdant hills and the wide expanse of the Caribbean Sea with its crisp horizon; continuous flowing breezes; and unparalleled views of the night sky over St John all help to create the illusion of being at the ends of the earth.

Marea’s design is largely in line with other luxury homes on St John, featuring a mix of native stone, warm-hued plaster and rich wood accents. But to truly understand the Skurniks’ design choices, you must first learn about Michael’s background.

He began his professional career as a waiter, and then sommelier, at the World Trade Center’s iconic Windows on the World restaurant. Michael developed his palate during his sommelier stint, after which he sold wine for a distributor, worked for a French winery, and eventually founded his own business, Michael Skurnik Wines, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

As a wine distributor, Michael’s spent plenty of time in restaurants, and he even owns St John restaurant Fatty Crab, an island outpost of the popular New York venue. Glimpses of some of the Skurniks’ favourite restaurants can be seen throughout Marea, whose very name was taken from a fine-dining restaurant in New York.

“Marea is an Italian seafood restaurant, and it’s one of our favourites,” explains Michael. “The word ‘marea’ means ‘the tides’ in Italian, and seeing as how we have water views on all sides, we thought it was appropriate. We spoke with the chef and owner of Marea before naming the house in St John to make sure they were okay with it, and they gave us their blessing.”

The Skurniks also borrowed inspiration from the restaurant’s décor—the home’s custom kitchen cabinets were created in the likeness of the rich, glossy striped wood that permeates the restaurant’s dining room. Paired with high-end stainless steel appliances and an off-white stone countertop inspired by yet another favourite restaurant—Sweet Basil, located in Vail—the kitchen feels sleek and modern, while maintaining a feel of warmth and comfort.

Off to one side of the kitchen, an impressive spiral staircase, framed with native stonework, descends below the dining area into a wine cellar, which will eventually be stocked with a selection hand picked by Michael for guests to enjoy at their leisure.



ABOVE Brilliant custom-made, hand-blown glass fish sculpture that separates kitchen and dining room from living room was initial inspiration for home’s design
 FAR LEFT The Skurniks drew inspiration for their kitchen design from a favourite New York restaurant, Marea, which also lent the home its name
 LEFT Kitchen, dining area, and living room flow into one another, yet are made distinct by architectural elements



MAREA IS THE EMBODIMENT OF PEACE AND TRANQUILLITY FOR THE COUPLE. "THE BEST THING ABOUT THE SITE IS THAT NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE, YOU HAVE THIS INCREDIBLE FEELING OF ALL IS RIGHT WITH THE WORLD

The separation between Marea's dining area and living room is denoted by the initial inspiration for the home's design—a majestic hand-blown glass fish sculpture created by Seattle-based glass artist Scott Chambers.

"We found a fish sculpture in a gallery in New Orleans, where Judy and I go every year for Jazz Fest," says Michael. "The gallery was closed but the fish sculpture was all lit up in the window, and we fell in love with it. We contacted the artist who said he could build us a piece, so when I met with Michael Oxman, the first thing I said is, 'Well, we've got this fish sculpture, and we want to build a house around it.' "

The layout of Marea's bedrooms, whose beds float in the centre of the room so east- and west-facing accordion doors can be opened entirely to take advantage of the site's trademark winds, was also inspired by the Skurniks' travels.

"We went on safari to Botswana one year and we stayed at this 130,000-acre game preserve," says Michael. "The accommodations were such that each couple stayed in a large, one-room bungalow. The bed was centred in the room with a desk unit behind it, and that was what I communicated to Michael Oxman."

Marea may be similar to other St John houses when it comes to its native stone work, but there are two aspects of the home that make it exceedingly distinctive on the small island. The villa is almost entirely off the grid thanks to the recent installation of solar panels, and right next to the solar field is a small, flat stretch of land just large enough to land a helicopter. As there is no airport on St John, the Skurniks hope the helipad will make the journey to the island that much easier for their guests.

Although the use of the house deviates here and there from its original plan—the tiki bar on the sunset terrace is the best place for morning coffee, while the Skurniks enjoy relaxing on the sunrise terrace at the end of the day, for example—Marea is the embodiment of peace and tranquillity for the couple.

"The best thing about the site is that no matter where you are, you have this incredible feeling of all is right with the world," Michael says. "Judy and I are happiest when we are there."

Since buying the lot where Marea now sits, the Skurniks have purchased two adjacent lots on Ditleff Point, reserving essentially the peninsula's entire point to themselves. While there are no current plans to further develop their land, they are carving meandering paths throughout the property, rising up high to take advantage of 360-degree views, and sloping down to the sea below, where their love affair with Ditleff Point began.



LEFT Accordion-style doors in each bedroom open to both east- and west-facing views, inviting in breezes and natural beauty
ABOVE By nightfall, Marea's outdoor spaces are ideal for entertaining under the stars