



JUGGLING FLAMING KNIVES WHILE RIDING A UNICYCLE MIGHT SEEM LIKE A MORE APPEALING CHOICE WHEN A COUPLE IS FACED WITH THE TASK OF ENTERTAINING EIGHT KIDS AT ONCE. But Mart and Janet Marshall tried—and succeeded in creating an entire compound where each member of their blended family of eight children, now aged 15 to 31, could find their own brand of happy.

A La Mer, loosely translated from French to “by the sea,” indeed abuts the calm Caribbean Sea waters of Great Cruz Bay on St John’s southwest side. And while true beachfront homes are rare on this tiny U.S. Virgin Island, two-thirds of which is protected by National Park, it’s not just A La Mer’s location that makes it unique. The sprawling island vernacular-style home offers spaces grand enough for the entire Marshall family to come together, and nine bedrooms, each with its own private bath and seven with private balconies overlooking the home’s prodigious pool, where individuals can retreat and find solace in solitude.

“Those kinds of spaces are what we were looking for,” says Janet. “We wanted places where we could all be together, and little places to escape to as well.”

As you glimpse A La Mer from the road above, it at first seems to be just another standard St John villa, with native stonework, Italianate roof tiles and sandy-coloured plaster. But as you descend the driveway lined with grand royal palms, the home begins to



WRITER ANDREA MILAM
PHOTOGRAPHER DON HEBERT

the fun house

BY THE SEA IN ST JOHN, COUPLE SPENDS THREE YEARS BUILDING A NINE-BEDROOM HOUSE WHERE EVERY FAMILY MEMBER CAN PLAY



reveal itself. It offers so much more than the typical beautiful view, cosy terrace and dipping pool. Spread out over A La Mer's combined 13,000 square feet of interior and exterior spaces are numerous opportunities for fun and games—shuffleboard, a basketball hoop, ping pong table, hammocks strung between breezy palms, a beach fire pit, dual stainless steel barbecues and a pool bar.

The pool is perhaps the home's most striking—and most fun—feature. At 1,960 square feet with a nearly 41-foot-long disappearing edge overlooking the home's private beach and Great Cruz Bay beyond, A La Mer's pool rivals even those at local resorts. A shallow beach landing is the perfect place for small children to play, while bigger kids, and grown-ups too, can strike up a game of water volleyball at the pool's volleyball net. Find respite from the sun in the shade of a single palm, whose shadow is cast on the pool's private underwater U-shaped seating area, or swim

over to the underwater bar stools facing the pool bar, complete with a large TV. The pool's waterfall trickles down over an artfully arranged collection of native stone.

The room that sees the most activity is not really a room at all.

"The most used room is the pool bar with the TV," says Janet. "The kids will be out there watching TV all night. Everybody's always outside."

The fine attention to detail found in A La Mer's exterior spaces is mirrored inside the home as well. Arguably, the most striking detail tying together the home's décor is the woodwork, crafted by Nicaragua-based woodworking companies Wooden Bridge Trading and Pinto Gallo Trading. A rich, dark wood trellis welcomes you as you approach A La Mer's entrance, and the impeccably crafted mahogany cabinets, complete with flawless beachy palm tree carvings, make spending time in the kitchen a visual delight. Red locust wooden treads on the home's dual staircases evoke a feeling of warmth and welcome, while the expertly hand-carved mahogany mirror frames found in each bathroom and featuring designs of seagrass, seahorses, shells and other beach themes are remarkable.

One of the home's most striking pieces is the large, detailed sailboat replica perched in a dining area window. The boat, and much of A La Mer's furnishings and accessories were supplied by Bauer International, thanks to a connection that was fostered by the Marshall family's babysitter's mother, who works for the renowned fine furnishings company.



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TOP V
ABOVE C
RIGHT C

"I wasn't going to do everything the same in each room," Janet explains. "But we went to the Bauer International store in South Carolina, spent the day there, and ordered everything. It was so easy. I was like, 'I'll take two of those beds, and two of those beds.'"

Many of Bauer International's pieces are reproductions of antique items found throughout the Caribbean. The result is a house whose rooms are clearly tied together by such items as the vintage-

inspired steamer trunks, complete with travel stickers, found in the great room and family room. At the same time, each room maintains its own distinct feel, like the crisp, warm great room and dining area, with walls of native stonework and stylish wicker seating arrangements featuring white cushions with bright green accent pillows. The grand 14-seat formal dining table feels elegant, while its white and green cushions pull from the adjacent great room's casual feel.

A La Mer is a home whose finishes and furnishings are refined and sophisticated, but not to the degree that you'd be afraid to make good use of its well-thought-out spaces.

"We knew we weren't looking at building a fancy kind of place with all the kids, so we thought to make it stand out, we'd make it more like a fun house," says Janet.

The design concept began as a small town of sorts, with numerous pods spread out over the 1.12-acre property joined together by winding paths. Janet's maternal instinct quickly kicked in, though, and the idea was nixed.

"I realized I wasn't comfortable putting kids to bed in one building and going to another one," says Janet. "I just couldn't not have it all under one roof."





And so, after thorough planning, sketching, drawing and re-drawing, perhaps the island's most beautiful "fun house" was born. The construction process, which began in 2006, would prove to be funny in its own right. Creative Builders' construction crew soon discovered that what they thought was a sandy lot had actually been the disposal site for dredged material to be dumped during the creation of the nearby manmade Great Cruz Bay Beach many decades ago. Crews dug and dug and dug, encountering foot after foot of muck, an entirely unsuitable material on which to tie a home's foundation.

"We took core samples and hit granite at about 25 feet deep near the shore, and 35 feet deep at the water's edge," says architect Michael Milne of Barefoot Architect, who still proudly displays in his office a gorgeous rod of silvery-grey granite bored from the site during the process. "We drove 18-inch steel piles filled with concrete down to that solid granite, then poured grade beams to join the piles. Anywhere there was structure, it got piled. The house was then built on top of the grade beams."

Theoretically, Milne says, laughing, the entire site could be washed away and A La Mer would remain, standing proud on her steel piles tied hard and fast into the granite 30 feet below.

A La Mer, which was completed in early 2009, today serves as a vacation rental for large families or groups, while the Marshalls, who call Pennsylvania home, steal away to their island retreat whenever they get the chance. When the beachside fire pit is burning, priceless family memories are being made, along with deliciously sweet treats.

"We hang out by the fire pit a lot," says Janet. "My kids make s'mores out there at night." M



LEFT C
ABOVE C

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