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EAST COAST STORY

Embracing the refurbishment of their Fire Island beach house, Laura and Taylor Neal created a seaside retreat inspired by their surroundings

FEATURE ALIX O'NEILL | PHOTOGRAPHY TRIA GIOVAN/GAP INTERIORS

INSPIRING



HOME TRUTHS

THE PROPERTY

A 1920s timber holiday home

LOCATION New York, US

ROOMS Sitting room, dining room, kitchen, enclosed porch with sitting and dining area, cloakroom, laundry room, five bedrooms, two bathrooms

PURCHASED 2005

PREVIOUS PROPERTY

'Our main home is a 1930s house in Texas,' says Laura.



PORCH

The family gathers here to play games, read or simply soak up the views across the bay.

Roman Column lamps with Natural shades, £117 each, Oka, are similar.

Vintage Industrial Cage Bulkhead wall light, £79, Industville, is comparable



SITTING ROOM
 'As we spend a lot of time here, darker colours seemed more practical,' says Laura. Try Stool One, £195, Another Country, for a similar look. Emily sofa in Chestnut, £1,600, Sofa.com, is a close match

Most wives settle for the odd bunch of flowers, so imagine Laura Neal's reaction when her husband Taylor surprised her with a house. 'I've been going to Fire Island since I was 17, and there's a village with lovely old bayfront houses, which are passed down through the generations,' says Laura. 'When Taylor got word one might be available, he convinced the owners to sell it to him.'

Off the coast of Long Island in the US, Fire Island has a population of less than 300, but in summer it becomes a refuge for thousands of New Yorkers. Just 31 miles long and half a mile wide, it is only accessible by ferry; cars are off-limits and the village has no restaurants or shops. This remote lifestyle is a welcome change for busy lawyers Laura and Taylor, whose main residence is in Texas.

Structural work is subject to strict regulations on the island, but the couple's house was in need of significant decorative repair before they could move in. 'The ceilings downstairs were simply the bottom of the floorboards in the rooms above, and the original interior walls were just a glorified form of pressed cardboard,' says Laura.

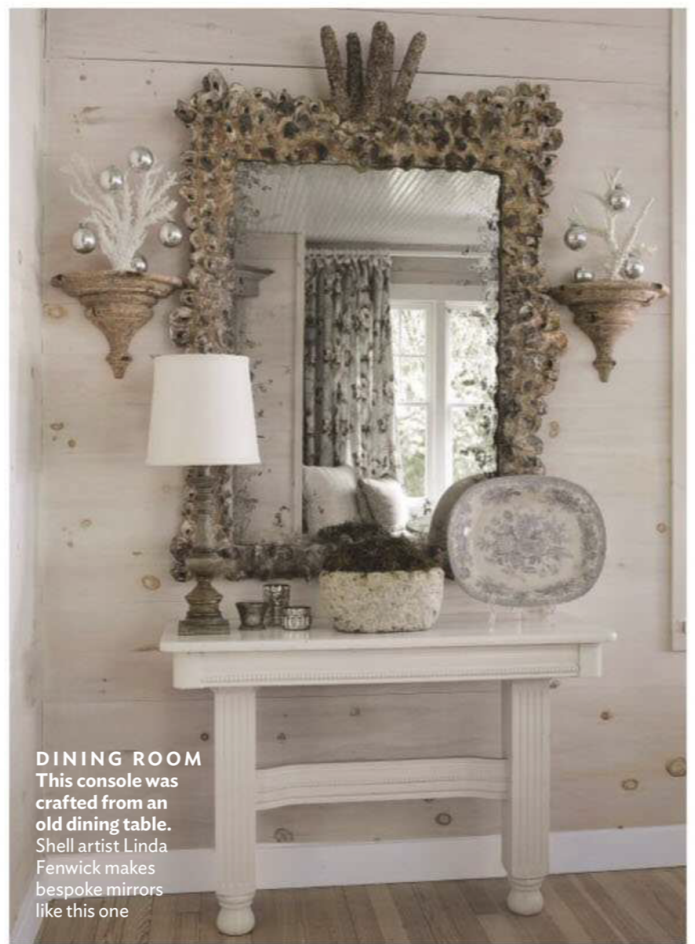
Laura enlisted the help of her good friend Cathy Chapman, an interior designer. 'We told her we wanted a type of English beach cottage, somewhere barefoot-friendly



PORCH
 This is the setting for special family occasions, including Christmas dinner. Large square pendant, from £778, Davey Lighting, is similar. Padang table, £1,395, Lombok, would work well in this setting



KITCHEN
 Fresh greens connect the room to the garden. Try Cooking Apple Green estate emulsion, £36 for 2.5 litres, Farrow & Ball. Sophie Conran for Portmerion tableware, from £7, John Lewis, is similar



DINING ROOM
 This console was crafted from an old dining table. Shell artist Linda Fenwick makes bespoke mirrors like this one

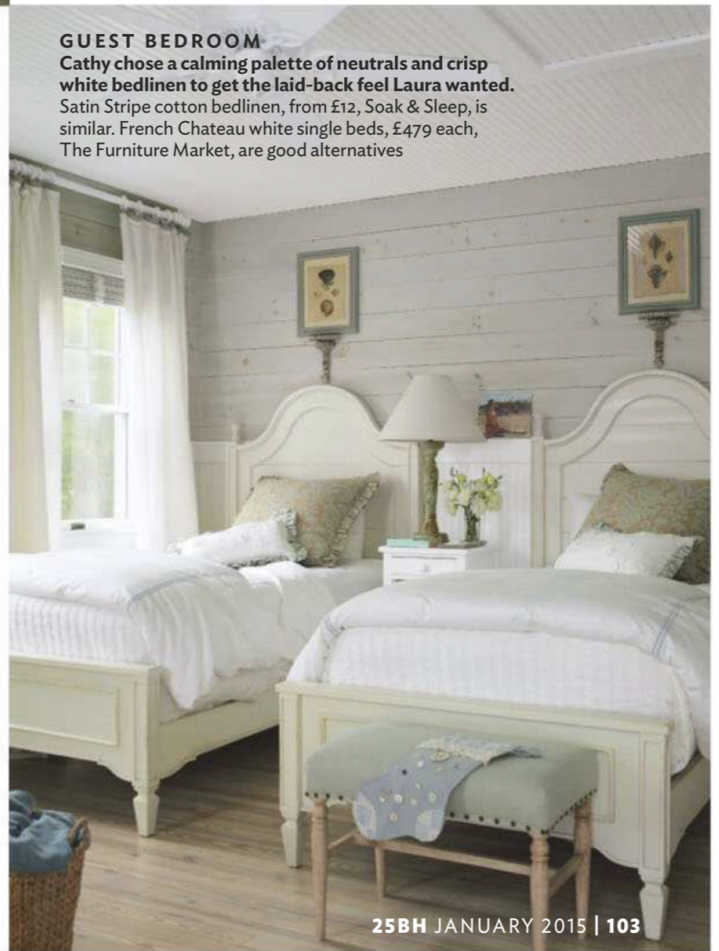
FAVOURITE ROOM 'The porch is spectacular. It's only 10ft wide, but it wraps around the house'

and stylish. She did a fantastic job of getting the vibe of the island without having spent much time here.'

Cathy and Laura used a century-old chintz sofa as their starting point for the decor. 'It had the feel of what we wanted and set the tone for the house,' says Laura. They chose a complementary scheme of washed-out florals and faded blues and greens to create the seamless transition between indoors and out. 'To me, the house perfectly reflects what my husband and I wanted in a beach house,' says Laura. 'It's quietly elegant and everything blends together beautifully.'

Occasionally, the couple and their children Joan, 27, Dillon, 25, and Paul, 23, plus Sally the poodle, spend Christmas on the island. 'Services shut down around mid-October, so we take everything we need from the mainland and spend our days bundled up in front of a big fire with books and board games,' says Laura.

Though she relishes the wildness and solitude of her East Coast retreat, Christmas on Fire Island requires a sacrifice. 'Sadly, we have to keep decorations to a minimum, as it's hard to drag a tree out here. But we make up for it with plenty of freshly cut greenery. And a big walk on the beach on Christmas Day is pretty hard to beat.' 25



GUEST BEDROOM
 Cathy chose a calming palette of neutrals and crisp white bedlinen to get the laid-back feel Laura wanted. Satin Stripe cotton bedlinen, from £12, Soak & Sleep, is similar. French Chateau white single beds, £479 each, The Furniture Market, are good alternatives