

SWEET SPOT

A Great Barrier Island bach by Lance and Nicola Herbst makes summer simplicity seem enviably easy to achieve. Text Jeremy Hansen. Photography Jackie Meiring

The bach, designed for New Zealand expat Nigel Timms, balances a sheltered outdoor room (opening off the kitchen) with a cosier living room. The walls are tongue-and-groove macrocarpa, the interior floors Tasmanian oak.



For generations, the bach has held a precious place in New Zealand lore, a link to an easy-going egalitarian past to which we are unwilling to bid farewell. More recently,

however, larger, city-style homes with multiple bathrooms and every modern convenience have been popping up at holiday destinations and their owners – what are they thinking? – tend to call them baches, too. So when does a bach stop being a bach? Where is the sweet spot between a holiday home with too little, and one with too much?

This is territory that Auckland-based architects Lance and Nicola Herbst have been exploring ever since they arrived in New Zealand from South Africa in the mid-1990s. While they also design commercial buildings and city homes, they have become known as masters of the perfectly pitched bach. The bach on these pages is on Great Barrier Island, a location they visited during their first year in New Zealand. Back in their homeland timber dwellings are rare, so they were fascinated with the small wooden baches they discovered here. They bought land on Great Barrier soon afterwards and began their own experimentation with the bach form, designing a humble dwelling that initially lacked even hot water.

When that bach was on the cover of this magazine in 2001, it was spotted by Nigel Timms, a New Zealander who has lived in the United States for the past 25 years. The owner of a successful retail business, Nigel, 58, felt the need for a vacation place reminiscent of his childhood summer holidays in a very basic bach at Waikuku Beach, north of Christchurch. “There’s that part of New Zealand that you yearn for when you’re overseas,” he says. He also wanted it to be a place his US-based children, aged 16, 13 and newborn, could enjoy for themselves as they got older. Looking at images of the Herbsts’ bach prompted him to purchase property on Great Barrier and ask Lance and Nicola to design a bach for it. “I want something simple,” was his brief to them.

The bach that resulted is indeed simple, and beautifully so. It is a



THIS PAGE Looking into the living area, the space to shelter when the weather gets too bad to hang out on the covered deck. **LEFT** The kitchen, with its island bench designed by the Herbsts. The ‘Pedro’ bar stools by Candywhistle for Resident are from Simon James Design.



Simple but elegantly detailed, the bach features a pine plywood-and-batten exterior. The timber and polycarbonate screens on the covered deck slide into position for shelter when needed.

“There’s a part of New Zealand that you yearn for when you’re overseas,” Nigel says.



With the screens closed to the breeze, the outdoor room can be used in almost all weathers. Cedar battens provide an elegant substitute for a ceiling overhead. The large tables in the outdoor room and kitchen, the shelves and cabinetry were all designed by the Herbsts.



THIS PAGE Screens lining the breezeway connecting the bedrooms and living area can be opened or closed depending on the weather. The steps up to the covered deck are also the bach's main entrance, with a view through the space towards Mount Hobson, Great Barrier Island's highest peak. **RIGHT** The bedrooms are lined in simple ply sheets. The 'Akari' paper lamp is designed by Isamu Noguchi and available from Cite.

120-square-metre, two-bedroom dwelling just a short walk from Great Barrier's Kaitoke Beach (the bach is available for rent on the website islandaccommodation.co.nz, where it is listed as 'Kopuha house'). Like every house on the island it is off the grid, and like all true baches, it provides a deliberate contrast to city life: the main living space is a covered deck (or outdoor room) with sliding screens for shelter; the hallway linking the living area to the bedrooms is an open breezeway sheltered by more sliding screens; there is no formal entrance, as the Herbsts prefer the much more casual strategy of having people wander up to the deck to enter the bach. The openness of the covered deck is balanced by a small, enclosed living space immediately adjacent to the simple kitchen. "We wanted this space to feel contained and cosy, a place to observe bad weather as it lashes through," Lance says.

This is the seventh bach the Herbsts have designed on the island, and all these devices have become part of their refined bach-design oeuvre. How, then, have they prevented themselves from slipping into a formulaic bach-design groove? "We keep having to drag ourselves back to the beginning," Lance says. "It's so easy to slip into convenience and stylistic solutions, but we realise that every new project needs real passion."

In this case, Lance and Nicola faced the unusual (for Great Barrier) situation of being on a relatively tight section with no clear views of the ocean. Their response was to orient the covered deck not so it was craning for views of the sea, but so that it faced north across a manuka-covered reserve towards Mount Hobson, the island's highest peak. Carefully controlled interior views give the impression that the neighbours' houses have all but disappeared.

In authentic bach fashion, nobody can spend much time at this place without thinking that this is all they really need. Simple, right? Yes, but don't underestimate the sweat the Herbsts put into designing the beautifully discreet details of these simple structures. "We still believe in elegance," Lance says. "You don't have to compromise your sense of aesthetics." •





Lance and Nicola Herbst

HERBST ARCHITECTS

The South African-born architects design commercial buildings and full-time homes, but they've become best-known as masters of the pared-back bach.

HOME New Zealand: What makes a great bach, as opposed to a beach home?

Lance Herbst: It's not about deprivation, but about consciousness, that business of being aware of how much water and electricity you're using, and filling your day with rituals – you have to cut the firewood and go out and get the fish for dinner. This building has been designed to achieve rustic ideals, but there's an enormous amount of detail in it to get to this level. That's because we believe in style and elegance as well. You don't have to compromise your sense of aesthetics.

The main living space is really a covered deck, yet you also have a much more snug sitting area, too.

Lance: In baches, we try and make one warm, well-edged space for when the weather gets lousy.

Nicola: We wanted this to have an intimacy, so we decided that we would have a fairly low ceiling with exposed beams – that's given it a richness and makes this space operate in a calming and more inward-looking way.

Your bach designs are well-known. Do you like doing bigger houses too?

Lance: I have no problem designing slick houses. It



would be a lot of fun doing something really slick and sexy. It's about context. There's nothing wrong with that from an architectural perspective.



TOP Simple shelving in the bathroom designed by the Herbsts. ABOVE The outdoor room's fireplace.

PORTRAIT: PATRICK REYNOLDS

