



HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Photos JACKIE MEIRING Words JEREMY HANSEN

There was a time when holiday homes were a place to kick back, scale down and get back to basics. Two South African architects in New Zealand are recreating that beach-house nostalgia.





For generations, the bach – the New Zealand term for a back-to-basics beach house – has held a precious place in the country's lore, a link to an easy-going egalitarian past to which many of its citizens are unwilling to bid farewell. The word is derived from the word “bachelor” and came from the fact that these old holiday homes were suitably sized for singles, even though whole families often squeezed in for the summer.

More recently, 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. What some regard as a gross misappropriation of a once-romantic term has given rise to a significant question appropriate not only in New Zealand, but in many other parts of the world: 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.

During their first year in New Zealand, the Herbsts visited Great Barrier Island, a holiday spot an hour's flight in a small plane from Auckland. (Nowhere near the Great Barrier Reef, it's the first island that ships from the east encounter as they head towards Auckland.)

The rarity of timber dwellings in South Africa meant that Lance and Nicola were fascinated with the small wooden baches they discovered on Great Barrier Island. They bought land there soon afterwards and began their own experimentation with the bach form, designing a modest dwelling that initially lacked even hot water.

When that bach was featured on the cover of a New Zealand magazine in 2001, it was spotted by Nigel Timms, a New Zealander who has lived in the US 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 that 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 to 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 120-square-metre, two-bedroom dwelling just a short walk from Great Barrier's Kaitoke Beach.

Like every house on the island, it is off the grid. There's a wood burner in the house for heating, water is solar heated and the oven and fridge are gas-powered. Like all true baches, the house 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.

A variety of woods were used in construction. The exterior is pine board and battens. The interior walls are tongue and groove macrocarpa in the living space and pine ply sheets in the bedrooms. The interior floors are Tasmanian oak and in the outdoor room, the ceiling battens are made from cedar. Lance and Nicola also designed all the interior furniture.

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 the reserve covered in silver and green manuka trees, 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 that 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.” **V**

- This bach is available for rent on the website islandaccommodation.co.nz, where it is listed as “Kopuha house” under “Claris/Kaitoke”.
- Lance and Nicola Herbst, www.herbstarchitects.co.nz

ABOVE The southern side of the outdoor room (left) is a shady place to sit in summer, while the northern steps open onto the private side of the property.

OPPOSITE A view of the living area. The orange couch is from BoConcept and the 24N Akari paper lantern by Isamu Noguchi. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT** The outdoor room features a table designed by the architects and screens of timber and polycarbonate that can be slid across for shelter from the wind. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT** The kitchen features an island bench designed by the Herbsts and Pedro bar stools by New Zealand's Candywhistle. The walls are macrocarpa, an exotic timber sustainably grown and harvested in New Zealand. **OPENING SPREAD** The house is designed so its outdoor room looks towards Mount Hobson.



ABOVE, LEFT Moveable timber and polycarbonate screens turn the hall connecting the two bedrooms to the living area into a breezeway. **RIGHT** The walls of the bathroom are lined in sustainably harvested Tasmanian oak. The simple ladder-like structure that holds the sink, a lower shelf and the mirror was designed by the architects. **OPPOSITE** An outdoor fireplace, surrounded by gabions made from local stone, anchors the outdoor room. The chairs are Eames replicas, while the ceiling battens are made of cedar.

