

This Side Of Paradise

DESIGNER CELERIE KEMBLE HAS FASHIONED HERSELF A FAMILY HOME-MEETS-BEACHSIDE COLONY ALONG A WILD STRETCH OF COAST IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC.

BY ROB HASKELL.
PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANÇOIS HALARD.

LION'S SHARE

A central clubhouse anchors the property, which comprises the Kemble-Curry home as well as an ensemble of bungalows. The pool is edged in limestone and lined with tiles by Dan Droney.

Sittings Editor: Miranda Brooks.





Just before midnight, a 40-foot container arrives at a vast warehouse in Río San Juan, on the northern edge of the Dominican Republic. Its contents might best be described as *Celeriana*: Victorian wicker chairs with riotous filigree, tufted and tasseled ceramic garden stools, mirrors girded in oyster-shell mosaics, and other totems of genteel dilapidation that number among Celerie Kemble's cherished possessions. By morning, Celerie herself, a New York decorator by way of Palm Beach, arrives to sift through it all, in a salmon-colored sundress and matching Havaianas, her hair wild from salt spray. At the sight of a needlepoint footstool sewn by her grandmother, her eyes glisten—ready tears are a Kemble family trait—and then she laughs. “This is not sadness,” she clarifies. “It’s sentiment.”

Back at the beach, she has a new family bungalow to decorate in preparation for the arrival of her husband, three children, and assorted friends for a house party. A cantaloupe-colored Turkish rug finds its way to a sitting room, along with a mirror upholstered in zebra skin, a pair

**SOMETHING
BLUE**

Celerie and her children explore a coral island near Río San Juan.



of tole lamps, and a daybed topped by a wicker pagoda. Outside, a menagerie of *faux-bois* animals scatters over the lawn, which rolls right up to the sand.

The house itself sits in what was once a dense jungle of sea grapes, orchids, elephant's ears, and tall grayumbo trees (said to be able to forecast the weather by turning their giant leaves upside down just before it rains). It's a crisp, gingerbreadly affair with a strong whiff of the Antilles: The white clapboard is made from reclaimed *tabla de palma*, the wood of the royal palm tree, and the elaborate latticework is a hallmark of traditional Dominican architecture. Here it's called *tragaluz*, which translates to "swallow the light," though in fact these cheerful trceries scatter the sun's rays to create astounding dappled effects on the walls and ceilings. Celerie gave her bungalow three gables in homage to the Palm Beach house that belonged to her great-great-grandfather Henry Maddock, one of that town's earliest settlers. The peach-and-pale turquoise trim, meanwhile, recalls the Bermuda cottage of her grandmother, "an accomplished barefoot golfer and drinker," says Celerie. That WASP world of broad porches, rusting white metal furniture, an excess of smoking accoutrements, and everything painted the color of sun-faded bathing suits permeates the atmosphere of this Dominican playground.

Ten years ago, a friend from Santo Domingo called to tell Celerie and her financier husband, Boykin Curry, about an extraordinary opportunity: more than 2,000 acres of forest, bluff, and virgin sand where the Atlantic churns up three-meter waves and humpback whales convene for their annual conjugal visits. The government had put the land up for sale after abandoning plans for three 300-room hotels. Curry flew down immediately, and two weeks later the couple and about 20 friends—from Moby to Mariska Hargitay, Richard Meier, and

PATTERN RECOGNITION

Intricate latticework in the clubhouse's bar, by Elric Endersby, echoes a floor of Dominican tile.



WATER BABIES

Zinnia and Wick soak in the Kemble-Currys' oversize copper tub beneath an assortment of palm leaves.





NEW SPIN

The clubhouse library features palms of copper as well as a miniature nineteenth-century French carousel.

Charlie Rose—owned it all. “It must have looked really bad,” Celerie says now. “Investor husband and his wife who thinks she’s a decorator, inflicting themselves in every predictable and tragic way on something pristine.”

In the ensuing years, a few of those early investors decamped for vacation houses more proximal and less inchoate. Meanwhile, the couple forged ahead on their own home, which Celerie designed on a series of paper napkins. The family flew down from New York for every New Year’s Eve, renting houses, throwing pig roasts on the beach, and bringing fireworks displays to the neighboring town square. They returned for every *Carnaval*, where soon they were judging the beauty pageant. Together with the rest of the investors, they established a road race, an art fair, a library, and a Montessori school. “We never wanted this to become paradise-comma-anywhere,” Celerie explains. “We wanted to feel like we were a part of the actual Dominican Republic, not just a beach at the edge of it.”



The metamorphosis of Playa Grande, as the beach has long been known, has been marked by near misses and happy accidents. There was the time when Bronson van Wyck, the über-event planner and Celerie's best friend from their Groton days, took a horseback ride through the hills with Richard Meier. The intrepid septuagenarian architect scarcely noticed the edge of a cliff through the foliage, and it was only by grabbing Meier's belt and a vine that Bronson was able to save man and horse.

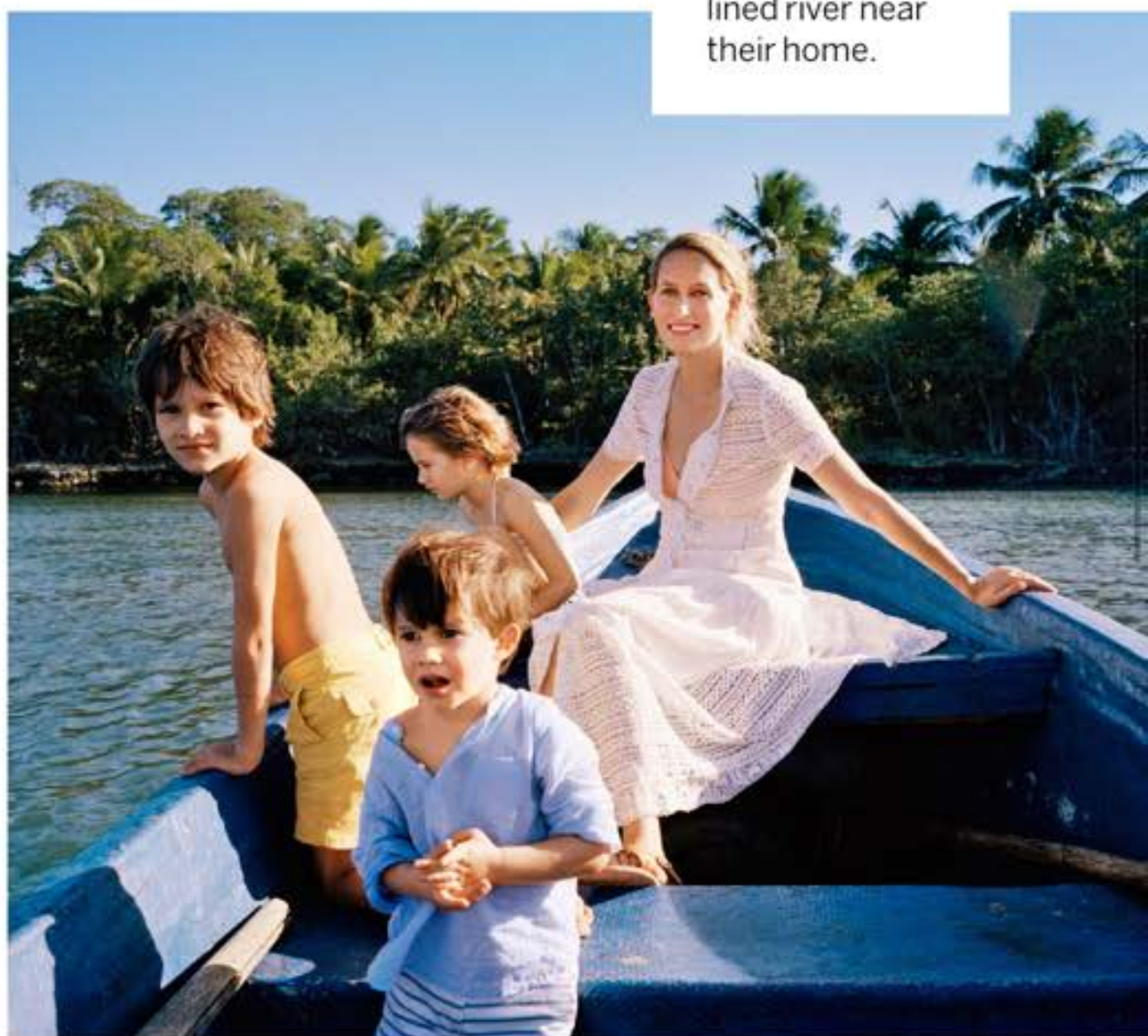
Then there was the discovery of an ancient Taíno Indian village. Boykin and his friends funded an archaeological dig, which yielded jadeite arrowheads, tools carved from manatee bones, and a coin bearing the name of Queen Isabella I. Minted in Seville at the request of early Spanish explorers, it is believed to be the first currency in the New World.

While most of the Playa Grande shareholders have yet to get started on houses, a few, including Charlie Rose and CNN's Fareed Zakaria, told Celerie to do for them whatever she wished. The result is a cluster of cottages surrounding a sort of clubhouse where everyone can meet for lunch, a card game, a glass of wine, or a coconut stabbed with a straw. The club's main pavilion contains a soaring great room with aqua-colored rafters and Dominican tile floors. A couple of vintage gessoed Italian chairs bought from the aristocratic antiquary Sybil de Bourbon Parme, their legs studded with seashells, flank the console, while staghorn ferns and oxidized iron mirrors adorn the walls. Celerie commissioned a series of whimsical copper chandeliers from a local artisan, inspired by Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka's glass flowers in the Harvard Museum of Natural History. "They're some of my favorite objects in the world," she says, "sort of at the junction where jellyfish meet flowers."

Next door, a chocolate-mint-toned library houses volumes running the gamut from *Welcome to Your Facelift* to a biography of Tolstoy. And an upstairs lounge offers an ecstatic survey of the fibrous: chairs shaped like jai alai baskets, a woven-cane backgammon table, and a pair of rattan

WILD AT HEART

FROM LEFT: Rascal, Wick, Zinnia, and Celerie (in Oscar de la Renta) navigate a mangrove-lined river near their home.



sofas that Celerie says may or may not be 1970s Gabriella Crespi (she doesn't mind a knockoff). A tramp-art cigarette table made from Labatt's bottle caps is next to one sofa, and a taxidermied toucan sits under a cloche on the bar. On the walls hang outrageous papier-mâché *Carnaval* masks made by local teenagers.

Celerie cautions housekeepers against polishing the verdigris off the copper and intercepts gardeners as they try to cut back grass between the flagstones. "Perfection, I think, makes people uncomfortable," she says. It's among the lessons she learned from the Palm Beach house of her childhood, a deconsecrated 1894 church that her mother, the decorator Mimi McMakin, filled with 1930s gambling tables, ten-foot-tall fringed umbrellas, and giant sisal rugs painted to look like Aubussons. Celerie—a name her mother invented one afternoon at Squam Lake in New Hampshire while eight months pregnant—spent her early years tagging along to flea markets and auctions. "My own career was an accident," she explains. "I grew up totally unaware that there was a part of me that could only get fulfillment the same way." Celerie and her mother are now partners in Kemble Interiors (with an illustrious client roster, as well as lines of furniture, accessories, rugs, fabric, and wallcoverings), and Celerie wonders if her six-year-old daughter, Zinnia, will catch the design bug, if she ever tires of catching lizards.

For the Kemble-Currys' children, visits to the Dominican Republic promise seemingly infinite adventure. Directly in front of the cottages, the ocean holds sunken cannons and the wreck of a French slave ship, while a concrete submarine station sits only a few meters to the west. Ravenel Boykin Curry V, age seven and better known as Rascal, is rarely anywhere but climbing almond trees, while Zinnia waits to receive gifts of tarantulas, land crabs, and brilliant green snakes trapped for her in the hills by groundskeepers. Three-year-old Wick, the Kemble-Currys' younger son, is learning to face his fear of tide pools. (They call him the sand flea.)

To friends who weren't sure whether the Kemble-Currys would ever get running water, the assembled buildings argue eloquently for the power of persistence. "What Celerie has made here—it's like the most wonderful thing



JUST KIDS

Local surf star—and the family's instructor—Eric Osterlund (LEFT) plays with Wick (CENTER) and family friend Joaquin.



from your childhood, and you wouldn't know what to call it, and if you tried to create it you couldn't, but she has," says Van Wyck, who plans to put up a surf shack on the parcel he owns up the beach. Though the place seems designed for the making of new memories, its nostalgic treasures provide a stay against the modernizing of things. Time passes, yes, but it should be marked.

At the end of another day spent rearranging furniture and tweaking paint colors, Celerie gazes up at a sky full of stars that feel especially close, and she turns toward the ensemble of white structures, now bathed in the dim gold light of lanterns carved out of calabash rinds. "It's a day old," she says of her Dominican home, "but there are generations of history in it." □

Vintage Salterini peacock chairs from Joan Bogart ★ BUY



Clothilde copper bathtub by Waterworks ★ BUY



HAUTE DECOR SHOP THE HOUSE



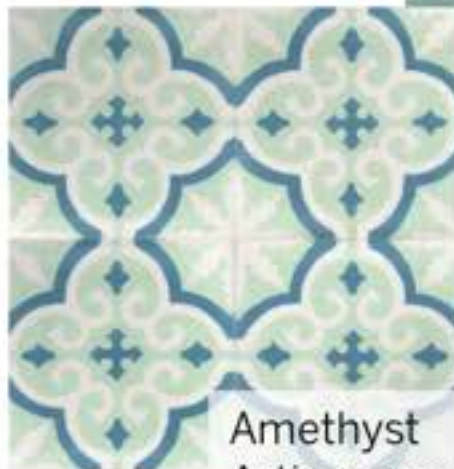
Lion with shield garden statue from Pennoyer Newman, \$1,500 ★ BUY

Bagan fabric by Celerie Kemble for Schumacher ★ BUY



Peacock chair from Rattan Shack, \$259 ★ BUY

Jaz Asbury Metal Design roses-and-ivy four-poster bed ★ BUY



Amethyst Artisan medallion cement tile ★ BUY



Fluted white stool, \$450 ★ BUY



SECRET GARDEN

The locally made bed in the Kemble-Curry master bedroom draws inspiration from one in Celerie's childhood home. It is dressed in Bellino linens and D. Porthault pillows.

