

June 3, 2011

<http://detnews.com/article/20110603/LIFESTYLE01/106030316>

Taste for the tropics: Couple transform bedroom into island retreat

Couple transform boring bedroom into island retreat

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It all adds up to a tranquil tropical feel: exotic woods, grass-cloth walls, French doors, natural light, bamboo shades, river rocks and abalone shell tiles.

Just about the only things missing from the Tahitian-inspired master bedroom suite in Derek and Linda Blair's Novi home are a thatched roof and the splish-splash of south Pacific ocean waves.

But who needs the latter when you can slip into a glass shower stall and relax in soothing water spraying from a rainfall-style shower head? The walk-in shower shares space in the open, airy master bathroom with a free-standing tub with Jacuzzi-style jets.

"Wow!" is typically the first word uttered by guests invited upstairs to see the Polynesian-style star attraction of the couple's home, where clean, simple lines and natural woods typical of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Arts and Crafts movement are the order of the day.

For the Blairs, busy parents of 12-year-old twin daughters, the tropical ambience of their bedroom retreat elicits memories of the resort bungalows where they stayed for a relaxing, 10th anniversary getaway on the islands of Bora Bora and Moorea in Tahiti.

But the transformation from the boxy, boring "builder's white" bedroom they used for five years didn't happen overnight, they say.

"It was the last room in the house to get done — we even finished the basement before we did the bedroom," says Derek Blair, a former producer of "Red Wings Weekly" on Fox Sports TV who is finishing his first year teaching digital media arts at Oxford High School. "My wife was waiting to do it right. And, boy, it was worth the wait!"

As much as she hated their plain white bedroom and "blah" bathroom, Linda Blair says she needed some design inspiration and a specific plan before embarking on the challenge.

"I often know what I don't like but it's harder to settle on what I do like," says Blair, an executive with ITC Holdings Corp. in Novi, which maintains high-voltage electric transmission wires in Michigan and parts of the Midwest.

"I'm not a 'traditional' person when it comes to decorating and the Victorian look is not me either," she says. "Once I had the idea of incorporating the Tahiti features, I realized it was a step beyond what I thought I could manage to do on my own."

After browsing through designer portfolios on numerous websites, she turned last year to Terry Ellis of Room Service Interior Design, based in the Michigan Design Center, Troy (www.michigandesign.com).

"Terry's samples on the website related to my style," Blair says. "And once I started talking to her, I could kind of see the light bulbs going on in her head. I could see the wheels spinning as she thought of the different types of wood, stonework and tile that we could use to evoke Tahiti."

Together, they studied nearly two dozen tropical resorts on the Internet, and Ellis drew quick 3-D sketches to help the Blairs — and herself — visualize what she had in mind for their project.

With 20 years in the design business, Ellis also tapped her network of proven contacts for many custom features, including several items made in Michigan.

For example, she commissioned Nancy Dendy through TRA Art Group in the Michigan Design Center and Michelle Courier of Art Leaders Gallery in West Bloomfield for some of the nature-inspired artwork.

And she hired Glass and Mirror Craft of Wixom to make three sets of French doors, with Thai mango leaves laminated inside the glass. Each door features three rectangles, a recurring motif that's a favorite of Linda Blair.

To create different moods, Ellis layered the lighting with ceiling light, pinpoint light over the artwork, pendant lighting with a tortoise shell-effect to bring the light down and accent lighting in the onyx mosaic niches in the wall above the bed.

For texture on the bathroom floor, she used elongated tiles that look like natural sisal mats but are washable porcelain. Ellis also suggested the Blairs install heated tiles. "I was indifferent to that at first but the bathroom is above the garage so it's really nice," Linda Blair says.

Layered bed linens, a two-tone coverlet, pillows in various shapes and an ostrich-skin leather ottoman also add texture to the bedroom and a relaxed, exotic feel. But the ottoman is not just a pretty piece of furniture, Ellis points out: "I always do storage inside — hide the junk in the trunk!"

In addition to the bathroom, the suite includes a sitting area with built-in bookshelves and a wine refrigerator in a cherry wood cabinet with zebrawood panels.

The corner sitting area is framed by raw silk drapes, held in place by tiebacks Ellis fashioned herself from three bamboo place mats she found on sale at Pier 1. She had her construction supervisor, Tony Muir of WoodMaster Kitchens in St. Clair Shores, cut them down to the size she needed.

Ellis also turned to Borders Books to create a ready-made library of art, architecture, food and travel books for the couple's bookshelves in a sort of "books by the foot" plan. "It wasn't crazy-expensive," she says. "A lot of designers do it."

Not everything in the project's original plan worked. For example, they substituted shell-motif light fixtures in the bathroom after discovering the sconces with banana leaf motif they'd wanted didn't meet code requirements.

Ellis used rich warm browns, greens and spice tones for the bedroom colors. "I didn't get into a turquoise palette — it didn't flow with the rest of the house," she explains.

And she tried to keep the design casual. "I didn't want anything stuffy. It didn't fit their home or personality," she says.

In fact, design restraint was a cornerstone of the project from the get-go, Ellis says. She wanted to create a vacation mood but avoid making it over-the-top — that's why a thatched roof wasn't part of the design.

"The initial challenge was to develop ideas that were understated, not 'Tommy Bahama' or too blatantly tropical," Ellis says. "We wanted a suggestion of the Tahiti mood — subtle and sophisticated, not kitschy."

In the end, she says, "Your master bedroom should transport you to another place — a respite where you can close the doors and escape."

Even better when that special place is Tahiti.

Design tips

Terry Ellis of Room Service Interior Design in Troy offers these suggestions:

A master bedroom suite makeover can range from \$20,000-\$80,000, she says, depending on materials, budget and taste.

Floor plans are essential to lay the groundwork for a functional room. Quick 3-D sketches are helpful to visualize and understand ideas.

Tap a local artist to create art that fits the room in terms of size, color and mood.

Layer the lighting and put everything on dimmers. Highlight art with focused light.

Texture used in many materials keeps a room feeling casual.

For new bookshelves, work with Borders to build a ready-made, interesting library with no extra charge beyond the books. "They will help evaluate how many books are needed, based on linear feet, then ask for topics of interest and discuss approximate budget," Ellis says.

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