

HOME INSPIRATION

# THE *Little blue* BOATHOUSE

Clever design  
and smart  
craftsmanship  
have transformed  
the ruins of an old  
summerhouse  
into a quirky home  
in the style of a  
boathouse

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OPPOSITE One of Miranda's paintings hangs over the dining room cabinet, which belonged to her father-in-law THIS PAGE, LEFT Miranda designed the loveseat around a length of carved wood TOP RIGHT The boathouse sits among woods of evergreen holm oaks ABOVE The kitchen 'island' was created from an old Irish dresser base with a hardwood surface added

It is a truism that three things sell a property: location, location, location. And if you're lucky enough to find a spot that hunkers down in a planting of evergreen oaks and sits above a sandy estuary with lovely views whatever the weather, then, frankly, you've ticked that box nicely!

These were certainly Miranda Gardiner's thoughts when she discovered the ruins of an old summerhouse on the Kingsbridge Estuary in the South Hams area of Devon.

Miranda, her husband Diggory and their three children had just completed a trip abroad and had moved back home to Bigbury-on-Sea. Unsettled, and still musing on the concept of the simple beach cabin – or bach – that they'd come across in New Zealand, Miranda began idly browsing online. She was delighted to discover the summerhouse for sale. With creative thinking and the right amount of money to rebuild, this, she reasoned, could become her very own bach.

"When we first visited, it was being used to store a beautiful Salcombe yawl [a traditional sailing boat particular to the area]," Miranda says. A sailing friend was adamant that they should keep it but they felt they didn't need any extra complications. So she and Diggory decided to sell up, move to a Devon longhouse in the Avon valley and use the remaining funds to convert the run-down summerhouse. The setting and the presence of the yawl decided the design: they briefed their architects to give the new building the look of a boathouse. The yawl went to a new home nearby and work began.

Their architects, Moxley McDonald, are local, as are all the artisans who worked on the project. Key to the process were Miranda's brother-in-law, who is a builder, and their carpenter, who designed and custom-made the windows

and the balustrading across the decking, as well as doing all the internal woodwork.

Miranda's confidence with colour, good spacial awareness and easy, eclectic style come from her experience as an art gallery curator and, more recently, as a painter. Add to this her love of browsing in builders' merchants and junk shops and it's easy to see how she has already clocked up several impressive renovations.

The tiny boathouse presented her with a new kind of challenge: the design of the interior had to be carefully thought through to make it work as a living space. Undaunted, Miranda had plenty of ideas. Her approach to decorating is similar to that of starting a painting: "Sometimes it begins with the desire to try a particular colour, otherwise it's about combining colour, shape and texture."

In this case, it was a colour. "I had in my mind the shade of old Quink bottles," she explains, laughing. Having managed to find just the inky-blue emulsion she was looking for (Dulux Azure Fusion 1), she used it for the planking on the walls of the sitting area. "We experimented with ragging the paint off while it was still wet to allow some of the wood grain to show through," Miranda says. This gives a two-tone effect of blue with purple highlights. "Almost like shot silk."

Colour was also the obvious way to break up the open-plan space and define one area from another: in contrast to the sitting room, the planked walls in the kitchen and dining areas are painted a soft white, with one of Miranda's paintings picking up the shades of blue as balance. None of this is instantly obvious on entering. The front door, actually at the back of the house, opens onto what feels like a lobby with a coat rack and an old Sunday school bench. It is, in fact, a floating wall where one can turn either way to enter. Walk left and it takes you upstairs to the bedroom and ▶



The sitting area centres on a small woodburner, with a French oak barrel stacked with logs. The planked walls were painted with a dark inky blue, then ragged off to allow the grain to show through

bathroom, right and you are in the middle of the downstairs room with the blue sitting area on your left and kitchen on your right.

Aside from the building itself, what makes the boathouse unique is the view out over the estuary, where the light is ever changing and there is always something to see, whatever the time of year. To make the most of this, Miranda positioned the dining table by one of the windows while she hunted for a large comfy loveseat with plenty of sumptuous cushions for the other. She eventually found a two-metre-long piece of sage-grey carved wood that was perfect as a decorative frontispiece, and briefed her carpenter to build a framework incorporating it. Her daughter's old single bed slotted inside the frame and, covered in denim and accessorised with large cushions, finished the seat off perfectly. With views towards Bowcombe Bridge, it's the ideal spot to drink in the scenery.

Art is a key element throughout. Some pieces are Miranda's work, others, such as the painting of a bridge that belonged to her father-in-law and one of a boathouse she bought years ago, seemed to hit the right note and fit with the waterside theme.

In the kitchen, a run of simple painted wall units contrasts with more quirky pieces that create a unique style: the 'island', where guests can sit looking out at the view, was created from an old Irish dresser base with a hardwood surface added; a cupboard for tea and coffee above the cooker was originally a French seed box, and a blacksmith friend of Miranda's used an old water tank to ▶

*The two-tone effect of the blue planked walls is "almost like shot silk"*





*The eclectic theme continues in the small but perfectly formed bedroom and bathroom*

fashion the unusual cooker splashback. The eclectic theme continues upstairs in the small but perfectly designed bedroom and bathroom, where window shutters came originally from a French bar, the loo roll holder is a garden fork handle and towels are stored in an old feeding trough. The mood is peaceful here, where a double bed with its soft-coloured linen sheets sits neatly under the eaves and it is easy to step out onto a wooden balcony, level with the treetops and take in the views.

Walks along the foreshore are a must or a paddle in a kayak to explore the sandy inlets with their overhanging trees and small streams that run down from surrounding villages. Technically known as a 'ria' - a 'drowned' river valley - the estuary floods twice a day with seawater and its combination of expansive mudflats and eelgrass on the foreshore supports populations of wading birds, fish, seahorses and even otters.

Whether exploring on foot or out on the water, when you are immersed in the beautiful surroundings and look back at the boathouse perched high above you, it's hard to imagine a more perfectly formed little home or a lovelier location.

**THE BOATHOUSE** is available for rent. Bookings are through Canopy & Stars at [canopyandstars.co.uk](http://canopyandstars.co.uk) - search for Bowcombe Boathouse.

OPPOSITE The black and white tiles are Portuguese porcelain and provide a rare element of pattern in the interior THIS PAGE, RIGHT A double bed

with washed-linen sheets fits neatly under the eaves in the bedroom. A seascape hangs on the wall above BELOW Kingsbridge Estuary



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