

BY CAROL PARKER RIFE

*A West
Indies-style
home for
a Gulf Coast
island lifestyle.*



When Tom and Sandi Irvine grew weary of winters in the West Indies, they opted for the next best thing to being there: build a home in the same British-Colonial style found on this island paradise bordering the Caribbean.

Their ideal spot? Southwest Florida's own Gasparilla Island.

The Minnesota couple discovered "this little corner of paradise" while visiting friends and before long snatched up one of the few remaining Gulf lots. Six months later, they were putting their ideas on paper with architect Randy Williamson back home in White Bear Lake.

"We just literally sat around the kitchen table and kept sketching away until finally we evolved the basic design, which never changed

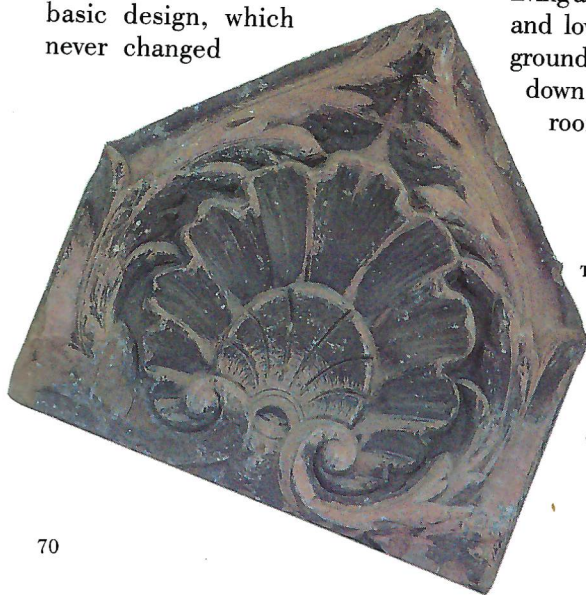
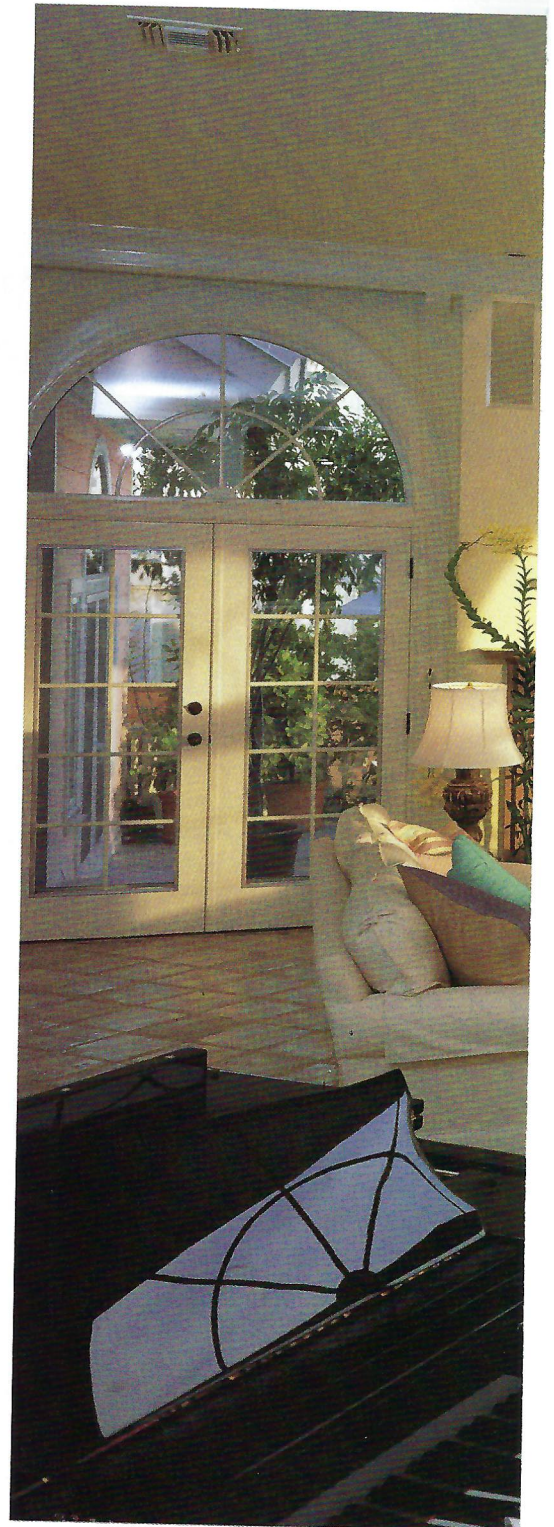
much from that day," says Williamson of R. D. Williamson & Associates Inc. in Fort Myers.

The Irvines envisioned a "very old and spacious house" with a Gulf view from every angle.

Refinements came with the final drawings. Like the formation of the "Irvine lagoon."

"When Tommy and I saw it, we thought, 'Oh my God, it's a square pool.' So we took a big red marker to it and sent that to Randy," says Sandi of the large free-form pool resembling a jigsaw-puzzle piece as it meanders around the Alaskan yellow-cedar deck.

The real challenge to Williamson, however, was creating parking underneath the house while keeping the living areas high enough to see the water and low enough to connect with the ground. This he mastered by stepping down the levels, starting with the guest rooms over the garages and pro-



TOP: Homeowner Sandi Irvine (seated) with Maria Williamson of Architectural Accents, Atlanta; Randy Williamson of R.D. Williamson & Associates Inc., Fort Myers; and Charles Nevinson of Architectural Accents. ABOVE: A wall of French doors topped with Palladian windows provides an unobstructed view of the Gulf from the living room. Bimini-stone tile adds a West Indies touch, its soft blues and browns highlighted by striped and solid accent pillows. Sofa and chairs are upholstered in an off-white linen canvas. Mahogany bar top is covered in 12 to 14 coats of a special alcohol-resistant finish created by Nevinson. LEFT: One of three terra-cotta plaques Sandi discovered in the basement of Nevinson's building.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ED CHAPPELL

Barefoot **ELEGANCE**

RIGHT: The “Irvine lagoon,” actually a free-form pool, meanders around an Alaskan yellow-cedar deck. **BELOW:** Cedar siding painted Bimini coral and white Chippendale-style railings capture the West Indies look the Irvines envisioned for their Gasparilla Island home. Landscaping by designer Peter Burner and Larsen & Associates, Punta Gorda. Roof by Dickson Inc., Naples.



gressing down to the entry, living room, and then the pool.

Palladian arches provide continuity while French doors lend a traditional touch. A 35-ton roof of white-glaze tile sparkles against Gasparilla’s blue sky. At night, authentic Westminster lamps light the way along a circular shell-covered driveway.

Zigzagging lattice work, a purely Martinique look, flanks the front steps. But the exterior color can only be described as Bimini coral, envisioned by Sandi from the start.

“Nobody believed me,” she laughs. “They thought it was going to turn out to be Boca Grande gray or Boca Grande beige or Boca Grande buff.”

Sandi dared to be different inside as well, desperately wanting to duplicate the feeling she had in their Barbados home. She didn’t succeed, however, until she met Charles Nevinson of Architectural Accents in Atlanta.

Three terra-cotta plaques, each shaped like home plate with a shell etching in the center, brought them together. She found them in the base-



ment of Nevinson's building and just had to have them. But when Sandi was ready for them six months later, she was perplexed about their placement.

"So I flew back to Atlanta and said, 'Look, I bought these three things from your establishment, no one knows what to do with them, would you please fly down with me and take control?'" she recalls of her pleading with Nevinson.

And take control he did. His first step: sketch every finishing touch in detailed architectural drawings, from the monkey-puzzle staircase leading to the master suite to the painted tiles depicting crude Creole artwork in the guest baths. Naturally, he solved the plaque puzzle. They now stand in arched alcoves above a built-in entertainment center in the living room.

Here, Bimini-stone tile and an early 19th-century mantel, reminiscent of Chinese Chippendale Georgian, express the West Indies style. Elsewhere, it's stated through hard-pine flooring, white-washed as opposed to pickled, plantation shutters stripped to their original greenish-brown color, and wicker furniture upholstered in a bright Bahamian print of deep blue, green, orange, and mustard.

Nevinson achieved the openness Sandi wanted by hiding the blinds in soffits above the French doors and windows in the living and dining rooms. They keep the design's clean look, yet give the Irvines an unobstructed view of the Gulf by day and privacy by night. In the master bedroom upstairs, he created canvas "sails" so as not to disturb the Palladian arch topping the French doors nor the splendid scene from the balcony beyond. At night, the Irvines simply drop the sails and lower the back canvas.

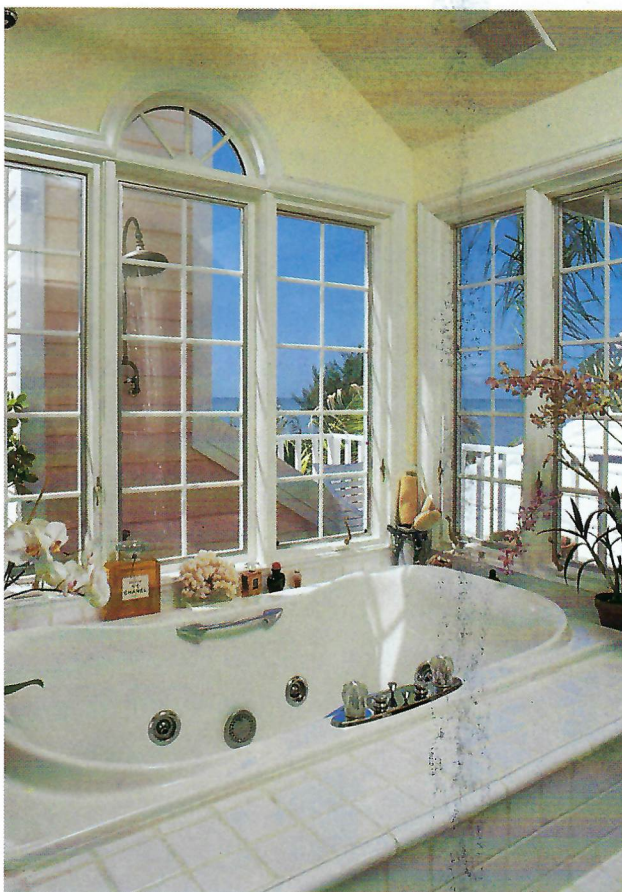
It's a favorite room for Sandi. Where sails billow in the breeze and a winding, glossy-white staircase of natural oak leads to a crow's nest for quiet reading or watching ships sail by. Turquoise waters and sapphire skies are equally accessible while lounging in bed. Nevinson positioned the bed so it faces the French doors.

In the adjoining master baths, shower-

Continued on page 82



ABOVE: In the master suite, canvas sails allow for picturesque Gulf scenery by day, privacy by night. Bahamian-print cushions cover the wicker chaise and chair. Lamps are created from cotton-spool spindles. An old plantation desk serves as Tom's computer station, tucked into an alcove beside the winding natural-oak staircase. **LEFT:** Her bath offers the choice of soaking in a Jacuzzi tub or showering alfresco. **BELOW:** A glossy bas-relief shell trim adds interest to the all-white baths for him and her.



would pull the shades down atop the light to protect the lenses from the direct sunlight. Sunlight would turn the old lenses yellow,” he explains.

Evans says the biggest hurdle to getting the repair work done has been obtaining funding. “It’s a five-year process—one I started when I came to St. Petersburg. The problem is, with cast iron, you can’t weld it. You must replace corroded parts. It’s a mega-buck process.”

Two detached houses were also constructed at the time the lighthouse was built. Now, along with the light, they are the oldest structures on Sanibel Island. Here the light keeper and family would live, sometimes for a few years, sometimes for decades. Each day the light required cleaning, fueling, and winding of a clock-like mechanism that rotated the light.

Henry Shanahan, a seaman and carpenter by trade, became the second keeper at the Sanibel light in 1892, receiving \$740 annually for his services. For 22 years he climbed the 127 steps to carry out his daily duties. His son, Eugene, succeeded him as the third keeper upon his father’s death in 1913; and Henry’s stepson, Clarence Rutland, became an assistant keeper in 1936.

The last resident lighthouse keeper, William Robert England Jr., left in 1949, and the Coast Guard has maintained the light since.

“You still need lighthouses—a known landmark to check all your electronics when you’re at sea,” says Courtney Ross, who grew up as a light keeper’s son in the north, and lived at six different lighthouses on the Great Lakes of Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Huron. Today, he’s owner of Ross Yachts in Clearwater and still has a close affinity for the nautical. “There’s nothing like being out on the water, checking your position on a chart, watching for landmarks and looking over to see a big light—where it’s supposed to be. Then it starts blinking at you. That’s some feeling . . . You can’t help but like lighthouses.” □

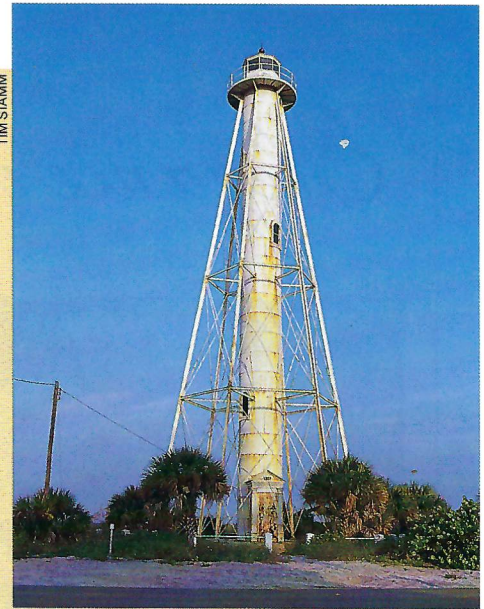
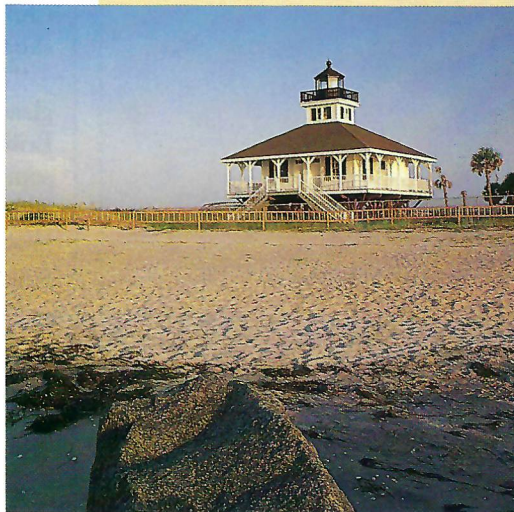
The Boca Grande Lighthouse

The Boca Grande Lighthouse is really an assistant lighthouse. It works in conjunction with the Port Boca Grande Lighthouse, a squat, house-like structure about a mile away, to help freighters attain the proper alignment when entering Boca Grande Pass. It’s known as the “Entrance Range Rear Lighthouse” because when the smaller light appears positioned below the taller light, a ship far out in the Gulf knows it’s on course for the pass and adjacent to Charlotte Harbor.

The Boca Grande Entrance Range Rear light is not as pretty as the post-card-perfect Boca Grande Pass Lighthouse. Yet this year, along with the Sanibel Lighthouse, it will receive extensive repairs and a new coat of paint, courtesy of the Coast Guard.

Throughout its history, the 105-foot-high light has provided a valuable service to freighters entering the pass to fill their holds with phosphate destined for far-flung ports. Built in 1890, the Gasparilla Island light has withstood the ravages of storms and high winds. It seems, however, the shifting sands

The smaller Port Boca Grande Lighthouse works in conjunction with its taller counterpart to the south.



Since 1890, the 105-foot-high Boca Grande Lighthouse has guided freighters through Boca Grande Pass.

of Boca Grande Pass were more than the original light could endure. As the natural pass shifted from the effects of storms and tides, the light was out of alignment with its cousin to the north. So some years after construction, the Range Rear light had to be moved 175 feet above the island’s high-water mark.

Some attribute the development of Boca Grande, where the Range Rear light is located, to the pyramid-like tower’s construction. Because before the light, little else stood on the island. But within two decades of its construction, the elegant Gasparilla Inn was finished (1913) and began taking reservations from the likes of Biddles, Drexels, and DuPonts.

Even if the lighthouse fails to visibly attract tourists, the pass’ worldwide reputation for tarpon fishing will certainly lure them to this quaint, exotic slice of subtropical paradise. To lighthouse buffs, however, the light could be located in downtown Orlando and still attract them from miles around.

Paul Snodgrass is a free-lance writer in Bradenton.

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ing really means communing with nature. In his, long paned windows bring the outdoors in while in hers an outside shower provides alfresco bathing. Both baths have glossy-white cabinets and tile with a bas-relief shell trim.

But the beauty of this 5,200-square-foot home doesn't stop there. Nevinson surprises guests with his own special effects: fishing pier-style lamps above twin pine headboards in the north guest bedroom, candlesticks fashioned of sewer pipe from Atlanta's Fox Theater in the dining room, a lamp created from an old Southern plantation cotton-spool spindle on the landing, and an antique theater marquee-turned-mirror in the south guest bath. The side panels can open to form a three-way mirror; the fabric inside is for pinning up notes.

Then there's the boathouse that literally houses a boat—a duck skiff to be exact, its bottom partially naved out by a macaw. Nevinson placed the boat across two beams to divide the upstairs sleeping quarters from the downstairs sitting area besides block the view through a window from the outside. It's the perfect place for changing in and out of swimsuits, storing fishing poles (beneath the antique staircase), or curling up with *Moby Dick*.

Other nautical knickknacks feel right at home near the mahogany-top bar in the living room. The ship's bell, its rope pull knotted the seafarer's way, or the Pacific oars stretched across the entry into the kitchen, or the small weathered Chris Craft, discovered in a little antique shop.

"They didn't want the Cutty Sark in a glass bottle," says Nevinson in his jovial British manner. "What they wanted is something reminiscent of the island, which is almost sort of Key Largo-esque, Hemingway, a bit beat up, a bit run down, and therefore more charming."

Yet, elegant in a barefoot sort of way.

"See my feet," says Sandi, raising a tanned but manicured foot, minus its sandal. "We're very low-key down here. We came to this island because it had that type of life."

A life of barbecues and barefoot strolls along the beach. The island life. □