



SALLY
CROXTON

Nesting instincts

The owners of this sleek new duplex at Nelson Bay are at the vanguard of what is tipped to be an escalating exodus from Sydney to Port Stephens. Talk to them and you realise why the pundits are pointing to a Port Stephens boom even though currently there is an oversupply of new housing stock.

Early retirees Phil and Rhonda Murray, who had spent the last 21 years in Sylvania Waters, did solid research before settling on Nelson Bay.

It was a happy compromise, as beautiful as anywhere along the coast but still large enough to provide a choice of good restaurants, shops and activities and with the attractions of Newcastle and the vineyards on their doorstep.

It also had an emotional tie for Phil. His father, “Gelignite” Jack Murray, a racing driver of the 1950s, used to ski its waters. His sportsmanship is commemorated with a plaque set in a rock at Shoal Bay as well as a tribute among the memorabilia in the refurbished Shoal Bay Resort.

Having found the place, the couple devoted their energies to seeking the property. They inspected 46 in Nelson Bay alone to try and locate the ideal home for their needs with plenty of space for their friends and family to stay but not too much yard.

Early on in their search they came across the sophisticated side-by-side duplex with a walkway to one side giving direct, if steep, access to Dutchies Beach. But one half of the property was already sold and the other side was taken by its builder/designer Graeme Bakker who was using the duplex as a family home while renovating his house at Anna Bay.

“We were looking again just before Christmas and saw it was on the market and it all fell into place for us,” Phil says.

The four-bedroom house split over three levels with living accommodation on the top two floors and garaging and storage below was built to take advantage of shimmering northerly views across the Port Stephens waterway to Hawks Nest and the Bulahdelah mountains beyond. It offered a pride in workmanship and upmarket finishes (even the downpipes are in shining marine grade stainless steel) that clinched their decision.

When it came to furnishing the house, the all white walls gave them a blank canvas to work with.

There were only two pieces they decided to bring with them – a cane bed with a resort feel to it and a square timber table with seating for eight. The rest they decided to buy new and source locally.

Phil says during their research the owner of another new duplex in the bay had been kind enough to show them through. They were taken with the interiors designed by



SMART: Great Port Stephens views and tasteful modern décor on white walls make visitors feel welcome. — Pictures by Ryan Osland

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Habitat of Adamstown and decided to use the same interior designers.

Rhonda says her taste was for unfussy, clean, minimalist almost masculine interiors.

They met Habitat director Kim McFayden and together they chose indoor and outdoor furniture and accessories which give the designer home a casual laid-back appeal which complements rather than competes with the amazing views.

Guests have their own luxurious resort-style quarters on the middle level of the house. The visitor space offers a relaxed décor with three bedrooms, a mainly white tiled bathroom with an oblong vanity plus a welcoming timber-floored living area with a raffia-sided sofa and a day bed.

"If you have the guys up for golf the day bed gives flexibility [of accommodation]," Phil says.

A bar fridge, china and glassware are cleverly concealed in a Japanese-style slatted timber cupboard to allow visitors to help themselves to a beer or make a cup of tea.

Artist Cheryl Cusick (whose abstract work is also displayed upstairs) was commissioned through Habitat to

paint her interpretation of the Port Stephens golf club with one of its black-faced wallabies. The painting has pride of place on one wall. The room opens to a wide deck with stairs down to the garden and under-house storage.

While the northerly views from the guest living room to the water are exceptional, the panorama from the main living area upstairs takes your breath away.

A kitchen looks out over a low counter to the timber-floored open plan living space which ends in a glass wall of doors with shadow blinds to protect from the summer sun, opening to the deck and the views.

The glossy almond-coloured kitchen with matching glass splash backs and stainless steel handles is designed to give a streamlined effect. Everything has its place. Pots are neatly stowed in drawers, small appliances and even the microwave have their own plug-in cupboard and, best of all, there are two pull-out pantries so you can find contents at a glance.

The stainless steel sink is sunk into the counter with comfortable white leather bar stools on the other side, chosen by Kim.

Texture was an important feature of the furnishings with raffia and teak tables and toning natural rough linen fabrics for the modular lounge and separately coloured chairs, each with its own ottoman foot-stool which can double as extra seating.

A faux fur throw adds a touch of luxury to the lounge, and cushions and pictures are used to give subtle splashes of colour to this warm, light-filled room. Aboriginal and African objects were selected add interest.

Phil said they generally agreed with Kim's choices and love the finished look.

Kim came up with an upmarket take on white resin chairs for their outdoor setting and matched it with an opaque glass-topped table which reflects the views. A table mat of smooth white pebbles which ties with the pebble landscaping outside adds the finishing touch.

Also on this level is a powder room and the master bedroom with an ensuite. It is a beautiful room where a red Indian wall hanging found on their travels and tucked away has at last found its ideal home, hung by Kim on a rough timber coat-hanger-like frame over the bed.