

LA DOLCE CASA

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Chance led Debbie and Dennis Simpson to this cleverly designed Auckland cliff-top home, which reflects their love of all things Italian and their changing lifestyle



OPPOSITE PAGE: Family photos and heirloom antique books sit proudly on the display shelving in the bedroom. **THIS PAGE:** The Italian bed and bedside table in the master bedroom are from Debbie and Dennis's favourite store, Mercatini. The striking mirror is from The Finished Room.



DEBBIE AND DENNIS SIMPSON weren't planning to move. After an extensive redecorating project, they finally had their huge family home in Kohimarama, Auckland, exactly how they wanted it, and its vast grounds were perfect for their two teenage children.

But that was before they took a holiday in Hawaii and Dennis happened to flick through the real-estate section of the *New Zealand Herald* on the plane home. "I said, 'Crikey, this is the sort of house I'd like some time in the future,'" he recalls.

"We weren't actually looking for a house," teases Debbie, "but Dennis is the sort of guy who's always looking at cars and houses."

Within 24 hours, the three-level Mission Bay home was theirs. The opportunity was simply too good to miss. "It's really difficult to secure cliff-edge properties in the [eastern] bays," explains Dennis. "Usually, when one does come on the market it's either out of your price bracket, needs lots of work or isn't what you want."

As it happened, Debbie didn't need much persuading. "As soon as I walked in the front entrance I just said, 'Wow!'" she says.

The leafy internal courtyard that took Debbie's breath away is a focal point of the home, which was built in 1996, but what appealed to the couple even more was the clever floor plan. The top level is designed as a self-contained apartment, featuring a large open-plan living, dining and kitchen area, a guest bathroom and a spacious bedroom with ensuite and walk-in wardrobe. With their two children likely to leave home within the next few years, Debbie and Dennis immediately saw the benefits of being able to inhabit this one level. "In a few years' time we'll want something that's just for us," says Debbie. "We're ready for the next transition."

In the meantime, Madeleine, now 20, and Michael, 18, who are both tertiary students, enjoy the comforts and privacy of their own territory on the ground floor, where their bedrooms open to the patio and pool. There's also a library that doubles as a spare room when friends come to stay, and Madeleine's extensive collection of towering heels is housed in a walk-through wardrobe between her bedroom and the bathroom she shares with Michael.

Debbie and Dennis have nothing but praise for the architect, Sir Miles Warren, who managed to squeeze more amenities and luxuries into this small subdivided site than seen in many larger homes. A high wall to the southeast creates a shield from the wind and the neighbours, while the two elevated patios leading off the living areas are perfectly positioned to make the most of spectacular views across the water to Rangitoto.



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Debbie chats with Michael in the streamlined modern kitchen. **OPPOSITE, LOWER:** The artwork in the casual living area is by Greg Lewis. **THIS PAGE:** French furniture sits well with the overall scheme. This 19th-century oak sideboard is from Donald Melville Antiques.



Even the kitchen is designed so the work spaces face outwards towards the view. "What I notice when I'm in the kitchen – a very rare occurrence – is that all you can see is water," says Dennis.

Although both from West Auckland originally, Debbie and Dennis are enthusiastic converts to the pleasures of life in the eastern bays. "You really have a different lifestyle here," says Dennis. "The beach is our garden. We walk out our front door, turn the corner and we're on Tamaki Drive."

Sitting on the sunny breakfast patio with an espresso at hand, you could almost imagine you're looking down upon the Italian Riviera, rather than Auckland's waterfront. Turn back towards the house and the illusion is complete. The couple have enhanced the Mediterranean mood of their home with furniture in a traditional Italian style, sourcing many pieces from their favourite store, Mercatini in Newmarket, and from Donald Melville Antiques in Takapuna.

The large Hinuera stone floor tiles in the entranceway and living areas set the tone, their warm terracotta hues echoed in the artworks, furnishings and accessories. In fine-tuning the décor, Debbie and Dennis sought help from interior designer Angela Hutton, who has become a friend since they employed her to pull together a scheme for their previous home. "We'd done houses before, so we thought we had pretty good taste, but our last house was so huge we needed some advice," says Debbie. "What I like about Angela is that she makes the most of



what you've already got before she even suggests what else to get. She designs a house you can live in."

This is the third house Angela has worked on with the couple (she also helped with a house at Langs Beach, north of Auckland), but Debbie says each décor scheme has had a completely individual flavour tailored to suit the architecture, its environment and their lifestyle needs. "She knows us so well now and understands how we live," she says.

The Mediterranean theme is continued in the small but perfectly manicured garden, where magnolia and

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT: Debbie, Dennis, Michael and Madeleine enjoy lunch on one of the two balconies off the living area. **OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT:** The sunny breakfast balcony is the perfect spot for a morning espresso. **OPPOSITE, LOWER:** Bifold windows in the ensuite open to the leafy internal courtyard. **ABOVE:** George, the family's black Labrador, cools off in the pool.

olive trees have been encouraged to form thick hedges around the section, and bay trees add classical elegance.

Such is Debbie and Dennis's passion for all things Italian that they recently celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary with an Italian-themed party for 120 people. From the personalised 'La Casa al Mare' invitations printed by Dennis's design, print and media agency Magnum, to the menu, the wine and the opera singer – every detail was as Italianate as they could make it. "We do love entertaining," says Debbie. "We have at least one big party a year for some reason or another – or sometimes just for no reason at all!"

Another passion shared by this fun-loving family is revealed in the spacious and immaculately clean underground garage, home to the family's five European cars, including Dennis's prized Porsche Carrera 4 and Debbie's periwinkle blue 1974 VW Karmann Ghia. There's plenty of room left over for a family-sized laundry, dumb waiter, wine cellar, boxing bag and storage. "The garage is the real reason we bought the house," Dennis laughs, and you get the feeling he's only half joking. ■

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