



# haven

A guide to experiencing the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island



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# This Island Home Is Where Their Heart Is.

By Odette Arnold  
Photography by Harry Taylor

Glass of wine in hand and the golden light of dusk on their faces, Holly and Bob White leaned against the railing of their second-story porch taking in the vivid oranges, pinks and purples of the sun melting into the Atlantic Ocean. "We absolutely love it here," said Holly, as she settled in to talk about how they came to build their dream home on Bald Head Island. "Of course, buying and building here broke every rule we had concerning a vacation home," she laughed. "This was not part of our plan."

Holly explained, "Rule number one was that it had to be no more than a three-hour drive away." The Whites live in the Washington, D.C. suburb of Falls Church, Va., a more than six-hour drive from Southport, N.C., not factoring in the ferry ride to Bald Head Island. "Then there was the budget," she continued. "We had three children in private school and one in college. At the time, I thought it was nuts. Now, of course, I think it's one of the wisest decisions we ever made."

The Whites assemble for a family portrait on the oceanfront porch of Cape Watch Cottage. Clockwise from left: Kelly, Holly, Bob, Meagan, Bryant and dog Sophie. Blair not pictured.





Holly said she did begin to dream that day, taking in the sweeping ocean views, the abundance of vegetation and the location in a family-friendly neighborhood.

The Whites first came to Bald Head Island in May of 1998 after receiving an invitation for an Island Passport Package in the mail. "It looked interesting," said Bob. "We were looking for a getaway, and with the ferry-only access and the golf carts, this was new and different."

Turns out, it was even more different than they imagined. "It was Memorial Day weekend and we went out on the beach on a gorgeous day and drew a big tennis court in the sand," said Holly, sounding every bit as incredulous nearly six years later. "We all played tennis out there and didn't bother a soul. In fact, there was this huge expanse of beach and nobody anywhere near us." Holly said daughters Meagan and Kelly (then ages 13 and 11 respectively) were simply amazed, having spent time at Dewey Beach, Del., and other seaside towns where, according to Holly, "you had to get out on the beach at 7:30 a.m. just to carve out a spot for your towel on the sand." The Whites were smitten with the island, and couldn't wait to bring their eldest son Blair, then 21.

With room to roam, their son Bryant, who was five years old at the time, dug out a message in the sand. "Nothing is impossible to a willing heart," he wrote in large letters, reproducing the words of a sampler that hung over his bed. "His middle name is Willing," Holly explained, "so it was a phrase he knew well. People walking the beach stopped to read it and comment on it." Little did the Whites know, that phrase foreshadowed their destiny with Bald Head Island.

As part of their Island Passport Package, the Whites took a real estate tour during their initial visit. "We were curious," said Bob, "but not interested in buying." Bob owns a commercial real estate company in Falls Church, so he is always interested in land and property values.

Their first impressions of the island were overwhelmingly favorable. "It is a concept that has been very well executed," said Bob of the development of Bald Head Island. "I'm very impressed with the job the Mitchells have done here. They have managed to develop it in a way that shows a lot of concern for the environment."



**Opposite page:** Cape Watch Cottage (as viewed from the beach) is a sprawling home that manages to remain intimate and charming. This page, left: The foyer, with its inlaid compass rose in the hardwood floors and exceptional interior details, makes a captivating first impression. Above: The wet bar at the top of the stairs services the game room and oceanfront porch beyond, as well as the three upstairs bedrooms.

While still enjoying the Memorial Day weekend, "We immediately made reservations to come back at Thanksgiving," said Holly. "Bob was determined to come back. We invited my parents and his mother for Thanksgiving and that was when Bob looked at real estate again."

During the second tour, Bob became particularly enamored with an oceanfront homesite in the Braemar neighborhood along South Beach, so he brought Holly back to look at the lot. "I reluctantly got in the golf cart and rode over here with him," Holly remembered. "I had my arms folded in front of me, and I was shaking my head 'no' the entire time. I thought it was incredibly beautiful, but I didn't think we could make it work."

Bob, however, began to see a crack in her armor. "She was saying 'no,' but she wasn't telling me I was dumb," he said. "I saw her softening."

Holly said she did begin to dream that day, taking in the sweeping ocean views, the abundance of vegetation and the

location in a family-friendly neighborhood. However, she still wasn't completely sold, she said, until after they had closed on the lot and met with Chuck Dietsche, a Wilmington, N.C., architect who has designed numerous homes on Bald Head Island and was instrumental in shaping its overall land plan. "It was just a perfect match," said Holly. "Chuck's ideas, his personality, his vision made it real to me. And it's really remarkable that about 98 percent of what you see today was on the original drawings. He read us well."

The Whites said Chuck handed them an extensive questionnaire that helped them shape the house. Holly spent 10 hours completing it, answering everything from what they liked about houses they had rented in the past, to what kinds of games they like to play as a family, to who is their favorite poet. "It was a very collaborative process," Holly said. "And thinking through every facet of the house ahead of time made decisions easier at every stage."

The questionnaire, said Holly, invited them to reminisce

This page, clockwise, l to r: Sophie, posing atop the welcome mat, is the first to greet visitors. The outdoor concrete Ping-Pong table gets plenty of action as a recreation amenity—and as a conversation piece. Bob and Holly enjoy the sun and scenery on their second-story deck, as seen through the adjacent screened porch. Bryant goes airborne as he jumps a homemade ramp on in-line skates. Cape Watch Cottage is in the background. Opposite page: Wide and welcoming, the house's porch wraps around three sides of the first level. The steps lead to a boardwalk, which in turn leads to the beach.





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about their childhoods and examine their emotional reasons for creating a family retreat. Holly said she thought immediately of Rockywold-Deephaven Camp on Squam Lake, N.H. She has a deep emotional connection to the place she calls her "Northern Spirits Home," since her family has been going there for decades. "It's just a simple way of life and good family time," said Holly. "That's why I fell in love with Bald Head Island. It's the same kind of place." She now refers to Bald Head Island as her "Southern Spirits Home."

Holly said other childhood memories of summers on the Jersey shore with her grandparents influenced her ideas of the perfect beach house. "We stayed in old-fashioned, traditional beach cottages, with porches everywhere. We were always outside—or moving fast through the house in order to get outside." Bob's childhood memories of the beach were not linked to any particular house style, since he and his family most often took camping trips to the beach, pitching tents. "We loved the simplicity of it," he said.

Holly added, "Spending so much time at the lake, I had forgotten how much I loved the beach until we came to Bald Head Island. Those memories, those experiences are what we are trying to re-create for our children."

Officially christened "Cape Watch" for the views extending

east toward the point of Cape Fear, the Whites' home is sometimes referred to by islanders as "the Ping-Pong House," because of one of its most distinguishing features: a concrete table built in a courtyard on the street side of the property. The idea came to them while on vacation in Cozumel, Mexico. Holly and Bob were walking the grounds of the resort where they were staying and they kept hearing voices of people laughing and having a good time. They followed the sounds and came upon two outdoor, hand-formed concrete Ping-Pong tables, "with kids of all nationalities lined up waiting for their turn to play," said Bob. "We decided we had to have one, too." The girls, now 16 and 18, have been known to sunbathe on it, and Bryant will take on any challengers in the sport. "It has been quite a conversation piece, as well," said Bob. "People say, 'Oh, you're the ones with the Ping-Pong house.'"

In fact, activity of all kinds drives the Whites' lifestyle. On the ocean side of the house there is a horseshoe pit, and Bryant has rigged up a ramp that he jumps while wearing in-line skates. Anytime of the day you can find neighborhood children coming and going from the Whites' house as they round up friends for a game of football on the beach, a soccer match on The Common at Cape Fear Station, or a bike ride to the grocery store for a treat. As members

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of the Bald Head Island Club, the Whites also enjoy access to the swimming pool, tennis courts, fitness room and golf course, and look forward to the opening of the Shoals Club with its plethora of activities later this year.

"They have high-energy, active lives," said Chuck, explaining his inspiration in designing the house to suit the Whites' personalities, "but they value family above all. The house can be described as turn-of-the-century Grandma's cottage meets summer camp."

Holly agrees with the camp-like assessment. "It really is about having fun and being together. The point was never to make an architectural statement."

In the beauty of the architecture and the majesty of the setting, however, the house can't help but make a statement, and its primary message seems to be: "Welcome." Cape Watch is anchored by a wide, inviting porch wrapping around three sides of the first floor, with direct access to every room except the kitchen. "Architecturally, most of the house is just life-support for the porch," said Chuck. "It's all about the porch."

Other exterior architectural details include cedar siding with white trim, exposed beams and whimsical dormers that Chuck playfully describes as "witches' hats." To a passerby, the house appears large, but very livable—a seaside cottage that is both sprawling and intimate. In keeping with Bald Head Island's philosophy of environmentally sensitive development, the house was situated on the lot to preserve as much of the native vegetation as possible, creating a privacy screen as well as a wooded setting.

**Left:** This upstairs bedroom connects to the screened porch overlooking the ocean. **Above:** What appears to be a powder room has a surprise hidden behind its cypress paneling—a full-size shower.

On the interior, the house is spacious and comfortable, with a remarkable level of detail—including extensive use of moldings, beaded board wainscoting and a coffered ceiling with recessed lighting in the living room. Chuck said he strove to reach a balance between two design approaches: the architecture of space and the architecture of room. The architecture of space, he explained, is the modern idea of free-flowing, loosely defined rooms. This approach is made possible through modern construction methods that do not depend on walls as the structural support system. By contrast, the architecture of room is the traditional interior layout, where walls are both space-defining and structural.

"In the architecture of room, you feel cozy, protected, even oriented," said Chuck. "But enclosed rooms can limit connectedness to the outside. Alternatively, modern space provides connectedness to space beyond, but can compromise coziness. By using features



"I hoped to accomplish the best of both worlds: traditional room definition with great spatial expansiveness," said Dietsche.



This page, top: Open casework separates the dining room from the entrance, but allows for abundant spaciousness. Above: Vaulted ceilings in the foyer reveal extraordinary interior details, such as painted exposed beams, beaded board wainscoting, interior glass-free "windows" and handsome light fixtures. Opposite page: The kitchen is the heart of any home. Here, the girls prepare breakfast as Holly makes plans for the day.

such as see-through casework, oversized doorways and rooms that flow into one another as opposed to off a hallway, I hoped to accomplish the best of both worlds: traditional room definition with great spatial expansiveness."

The interior decorating was another White-Dietsche collaboration. Chuck's wife Anna Dietsche, also an architect, designs interiors for Chuck's clients. "We had a great time with this house," said Holly, "and I loved working with Anna. She has a wonderful eye for color and detail, which was a tremendous asset." Holly said Anna gave her excellent direction, "while allowing me to run with the things I really wanted. And in some cases, she definitely kept me out of trouble."

While the finished product might suggest otherwise, Holly and Anna did not spend a great deal of time agonizing over every fabric swatch and color sample. "I met Anna in High Point and told her I had 24 hours," said Holly. According to Holly, Anna was doubtful they could accomplish everything, but was game to get done what they could in that short period of time. "We did the whole house," said Holly. "We had to, because that was all the time I could give to it."

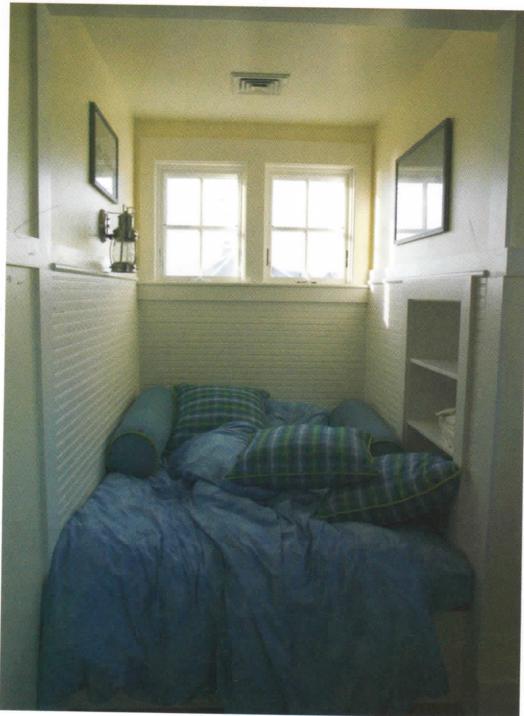
By way of explanation, Holly again

credited the questionnaire that had helped Chuck design the house. "We knew what we needed and where it was going to be placed," explained Holly. "All of the issues—from number and size of beds to the placement of the sofas and lamps—were already decided. That made shopping a great deal easier."

On the first level of the house, the living room opens to the dining room, which in turn is open to the kind of kitchen that any gourmet cook would adore—and she does. Holly loves creating large meals for her family, and a well-equipped, well-appointed kitchen was very important to her. The solid surface counter tops and stainless steel appliances are sleek and modern, while the center island is a magnet for warmth, drawing people around it for food, drinks and endless conversation.

The first floor also has a master suite with stunning ocean views and a combination office/den/spare bedroom. The adjacent powder room is actually a full bath, the shower somewhat hidden behind the cypress paneling. "The idea is that Bob's office can double as a spare bedroom with the fold-out sofa," explained Holly, "so having a full bath there is helpful." The room is handsomely finished with mahogany wood paneling and built-in shelves waiting to be gradually filled





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The bedroom on the northwest corner does not have ocean views, but it does have an alcove—a sort of extra large window seat, fondly referred to as the game nook.

with books and keepsakes.

At the top of the stairs is a wet bar that opens to a game room furnished with comfortable seating and a card table tucked into the corner. It's the place you're likely to find a heated backgammon challenge underway, a jigsaw puzzle in progress and various family and friends spilling out onto the connecting sundeck to enjoy the uninterrupted panoramic views of the ocean.

Two of the three upstairs bedrooms also connect to the second-story sundeck. On the eastern side, a screened-in section of the deck is furnished with a table and chairs, "the site of many family dinners," said Holly. The bedroom on the northwest corner does not have ocean views, but it does have an alcove—a sort of extra large window seat, fondly referred to as the game nook—that is the preferred sleeping spot for Bryant and Sophie, the Whites' liver and white English Springer spaniel.

Adding to the spaciousness of the approximately 3,000-square-foot house is a 600-square-foot detached croft, with a two-car garage and workroom on the first level and a combination office/guest suite above. Holly works as a sales executive for a New England printer serving the fundraising community, a job she can do wherever she has a telephone and Internet access. She uses the space every time she is on the island, somehow managing to concentrate on work in spite of the spectacular ocean views from her desk. Additionally, there is a king-size bed in the croft, as well as a full bathroom, small refrigerator and coffee maker. Holly said she often prefers to sleep in the croft when she and Sophie are the only ones

at the house. "It's wonderfully self-contained," she said. "And it's very cozy out there."

Holly and Bob still smile about the circumstances that led them to Bald Head Island, and ultimately to the home they now so thoroughly enjoy.

Financially, the Whites point out, the investment has been a good one. Cape Watch is part of Bald Head Island Limited's property management program and they have been very pleased with both the amount of time the home is rented and the service they have received. "Everybody's been great," said Bob. "It has worked out very well."

"In spite of my initial concerns, it's all been good," agreed Holly. "It's all about relationships here—the new ones we've made and the lifelong ones we continue to cherish." With the pace of life in northern Virginia and the hectic schedules life demands of them, Holly and Bob see their Bald Head Island retreat as a therapeutic indulgence. "Living on island time," she concluded, "is good for us."

Her father agreed. "Holly, now I get it," he said, after spending a few days with the family and getting acquainted with Bald Head Island. "I've never seen you so relaxed."

*Odette Arnold is a freelance writer whose every word about Bald Head Island comes straight from the heart. She has written for many national corporations and numerous magazines, but she has recently shifted her focus closer to her Wilmington, N.C., home.*