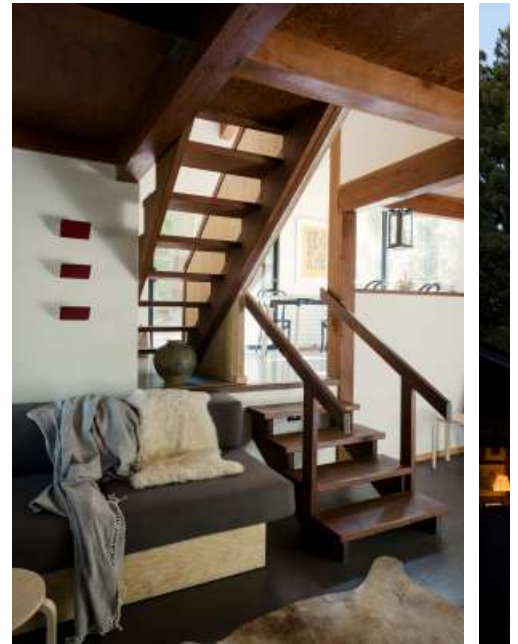




Balthazar making the most of the 'sleeping dogs' mantra



DeWitt's central living area

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Preface

Welcome to The Sea Ranch. Newcomers are encouraged – as long as they adhere to the aesthetic of this natural wonder

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“Good boy, quiet!” Balthazar, a boisterous young pup, is being rewarded for his silence. Or rather, he’s being bribed with small pieces of cheese to stop barking. To be fair, the rescue dog has only had a few days to get used to his new wooded surroundings. But his owner, architect Chad DeWitt, has confessed to being a little concerned that the noise might shatter the awesome silence of the place – to the consternation of his neighbours.

DeWitt owns a house in The Sea Ranch, a community about three hours’ drive north of San Francisco, stretching along miles of coastline. Split by the Pacific Highway –

which is more like a country road – more than 2,000 houses either nestle near cliffs looking onto the ocean or are set on higher ground in the aforementioned forest.

Built in the early 1960s by Oceanic Properties, a subsidiary of a Hawaiian property developer, The Sea Ranch is a product of its time, conceived with utopian ideals that emphasised the outdoors. Houses have a minimalist design aesthetic, remains affordable (recent millionaire vanity pads aside) and houses are average in size. “It was supposed to be very democratic,” says DeWitt of the community in which he has lived since the start of 2017.

Homes at The Sea Ranch almost feel like treehouses. Dominated by a muted colour palette of greys and browns, exteriors are predominantly clad in resawn tongue-and-groove redwood and, here and there, cedar shingle or plywood. The design of DeWitt’s home, by Joseph Esherick, is influenced by two earlier Bay Area architects, Bernard Maybeck and William Wurster. He came up with the notion of “saddles”: ancillary offshoots for spaces such as the bathroom and kitchen, allowing the central living area to dominate. In DeWitt’s kitchen an original unnamed work by Barbara Stauffacher Solomon hangs above the spice rack. She was instrumental in the early days of The Sea Ranch, coming up with the community’s ram’s-head logo (reflecting the land’s previous incarnation as a sheep station, it’s plastered on the exterior of Sea Ranch Lodge, the lone hotel), as well as the famed “supergraphics”. The latter are a mixture of oversized fonts and boldly painted geometric shapes that blend her Swiss modernist schooling with West Coast pop art; they are seen in the changing rooms of one of three communal swimming pools here.

DeWitt is a Sea Ranch purist. In his early forties, he’s also part of a new guard that has moved here in the past few years. While the median Ranch dweller remains a retiree, a younger set is looking to re-establish some of the lofty ideals that had arguably been sacrificed to the needs of the property market.

On a balmy evening DeWitt is meeting a group of friends – many of them relative newcomers – for sundowners on Pebble Beach. “I always thought I’d live in the woods of northern California,” says Martin Otis, originally from Oakland, who moved here with husband Jeremy three years ago. Both learnt about The Sea Ranch as undergraduates and, now that high-speed internet has finally arrived, are able to live and work full-time from their cabin. Their house was designed in 1972 by Obie G Bowman and is one of 15 walk-ins that he envisioned for the community.

A fascinating feature can be found beside the small staircase that leads up to the skylight-dominated bedroom. Built into the sidewall is a set of bunkbeds that, although

part of the original house, had been turned into cupboards by the previous tenants. A mainstay of homes throughout The Sea Ranch, they point to a time of more relaxed notions of communal living and privacy.

Leslie Redick, another wine-sipping beach dweller, has been at The Sea Ranch for a year. A fan of the community's landscape architect and planner Lawrence Halprin, she had been living on California's Central Coast before answering an advert to work for The Sea Ranch Association, which oversees regulations. She now resides in a corner house in The Clusters: they were designed by William Turnbull, a member of the MLTW group that devised many of the community's homes. "I'm a relaxed person but I like rules," she says. "You can't live here if you don't like them – they keep the place beautiful."

It's this notion of a closely guarded design aesthetic that either becomes cloying or vital, depending on which side of the fence you sit. The slightly Orwellian-sounding Association's Department of Design, Compliance and Environmental Management regulates building fabrics, ensures exterior lighting is shielded and prohibits postboxes outside homes. DeWitt jokes about the fact that all signage has a 30-degree angle on top and mentions the "Barnies": the old-timer stewards of the Big White Barn – a communal space – who closely guard what events take place there. But for new arrivals, 1960s utopia still rings true. "The ideals that the founders set out are just as good now," says Redick. "Hiking and the beach is what it's all about."

Monty Anderson and Megan Bellue testify to this notion with their Galanter & Jones outdoor bench that allows for prolonged stargazing. The couple, who bought their house in 2014 and later remodelled it, live in the "transitional zone" between the coast and woodland, agreeing that houses should have simple exteriors. Their 1967 home is by Ned Westover, who designed just two homes in The Sea Ranch. The other is occupied by Peter Jenny, who has lived in the community for 12 years and seen the generational shift first-hand. Relaxing in a lounge next to a Malm gas fire, he says that he's happy that a younger set are coming who are excited by The Sea Ranch spirit. "We try to control things so you don't have a big pink house on the hill," he says. It's hard to disagree with that.

Out and about

With a focus on nature, it's no surprise that there are outdoor amenities aplenty. There are three swimming pools (try Moonraker for the supergraphics or Ohlson Recreation Center for the stunning design of what used to be a slide), an equestrian centre, tennis and volleyball courts, picnic areas and plenty of woodland and coastal trails.

Just don't expect to find anywhere to do your shopping: the nearest supermarket is 10km away in Gualala. Though if you need to make adjustments to your home you're

in luck: Sea Ranch Supply has all the approved materials and colour schemes to make houses true to the 1960s and 1970s, as well as copper nails that won't rust in the salty air.