

ELLE DECOR

A Fantasy Home on a Tropical Island

Jill and David Gilmour's private retreat in Fiji is the ultimate in seaside living

Written by Mitchell Owens • Photographed by Simon Upton • Produced By Anita Sarsidi



No man is an island, the saying goes, but David Gilmour is all that and so much more. The Canada-born entrepreneur has made his mark on everything from housewares (he brought Dansk to North America) to beverages (he founded Fiji Water) to the Internet (Gilmour's latest venture is Zinio, a digital-media firm aiming to revolutionize the way magazines and newspapers are consumed). But get him started on the subject of his life's delight and one is treated to a paean to Wakaya, the 2,200-acre private island in Fiji where he and his wife, Jill, spend four months every year. "It is the most perfect thing," David declares of his South Seas paradise. "Most men I know want to own a saloon or an island. I chose the island."

The centerpiece of the couple's getaway is their Wakaya Club & Spa, an eco-paradise where the food is grown organically, the dinner table is laden with native fallow deer and wild pigs, and boldface folk can avoid the glare of paparazzi flashbulbs. Only 14 couples are allowed at a time, among them Prince Felipe of Spain and his wife, Letizia, who spent their honeymoon here, and Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban. The Gilmours are also prime benefactors of their part-time community, having built a village for the Fijian workers, with a charming church and a school considered the finest in the archipelago. The most recent addition to the array of structures is a new home for the Gilmours. Called Sega na Leqa (Fijian for No Worries), it is a one-bedroom pavilion where modern architecture, native stone and wood, and Asian antiques meld into something close to magic.

“We tried to use as many of the local materials as possible,” explains Jill, who conceived the 10,000-square-foot house and neighboring guest villa with Manhattan-based designer Tony Chi, a celebrated perfectionist best known for sensationally chic restaurants, such as Spoon by Alain Ducasse in Hong Kong. Composed of three wings crowned with shimmering zinc roofs inspired by classical Chinese architecture and African tribal structures, the house, which took four years to build, juxtaposes walls of gathered stone—rough, tumbled smooth, and lichen encrusted—with crystalline planes of glass that frame jaw-dropping views of the Koro Sea on one side and gardens on the other. Even the reddish-brown wood used throughout the house is indigenous, a tropical hardwood called *vesi*. The front doors are made of it, too; their sculptural patchwork of blocks intended by Jill to recall the Dansk cutting boards her husband championed back in the 1950s. The ebony-stained bamboo floors remain unmarred by shoe scuffs—the Gilmours have adopted the Fijian habit of padding around barefoot—and are scattered with antique carpets from many countries.

“The house is an amalgamation of our tastes and our history,” says Jill, a native of Auckland, New Zealand, who has conjured more than a dozen residences during the couple’s 34 years together. “I worked in fashion, which is all about texture and scale, so I’m very aware of my environment,” she adds. “I even move furniture in hotel rooms.”

The atmosphere at Segā na Leqā is a bewitching synthesis of Western comfort and Eastern mystery. “We wanted the influence of Asia, combined with the best of contemporary space,” David explains. A table displaying orange-red Burmese lacquerware greets visitors in the foyer. Anchoring the large living room, which Tony Chi dubbed “the great hall” (“It sounds very lofty, but that’s what we’ve ended up calling it,” Jill says with a laugh), are choice pieces from the couple’s collection, notably a carved-wood head of Buddha with a seraphic smile on its lips crafted in Burma centuries ago. Of a pair of graceful hand fragments standing nearby, Jill says, “Those are Thai, lopped off some gorgeous Buddha, probably. And the table they sit on is a kang bed from China.” A pair of charming miniature horses mounted on wheels was made for an Indian maharaja and found by one of David’s sisters. And ancient-Egyptian artifacts line the shelves of the library-office the Gilmours share, including an arresting pair of eyes rimmed with copper.

“I just walked around staring at everything,” says Paramount Pictures CEO turned cancer activist Sherry Lansing. She and her husband, Oscar-winning director William Friedkin, were among Segā na Leqā’s first guests. “Looking through those windows at the ocean makes you feel you are floating. David and Jill’s place is one of the most beautiful houses I’ve ever seen. It’s paradise on earth.”

Words like that bring a grin to David’s face. “You sort of give up after a while, thinking you’ll never find the perfect combination,” he explains. “But Segā na Leqā is totally satisfying. I wouldn’t change a thing. This is the ultimate home.” Maybe four months a year isn’t going to be nearly enough.









