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DESERT LIFE
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WANDERLUST
DISCOVER OUR LOCAL GEMS

+ Historic hotels, home décor, healthy shakes and more.
At a Glance
Property: 276 East Palo Verde
Residents: Troy, Gino and Mar, the Vizsla (Hungarian hunting dog)
Purchased: 2008
Square feet: 2,553;
4 bedrooms, 4 bath (including casita)
Design inspiration: Art Deco Mediterranean
Standout feature: The meticulously landscaped, drought-resistant garden with rustic pond in which live more than a dozen red-eared slider turtles.

Double the Fun at Villa Vecchio
Partners in life and design reinvented their charismatic two-story Mediterranean-style house with a dramatic makeover.

“IT’s arguably the cutest, most charming house in Palm Springs, based on the people who stop in front almost every day,” Troy Williams says proudly. And why shouldn’t he gush. He and Gino Dreese, his partner in business and life, lovingly restored one of only a few two-story homes in Tahquitz River Estates. But there’s much more to the tale.

Nine years ago, this Spanish-style house at 276 E. Palo Verde Avenue, built in 1931 by Marjorie Main (or Ma Kettle, as she was better known), sat in wretched disrepair. Windows were clouded and etched by water damage, elaborate tile work woefully disheveled and dingy and the rustic pavers that snaked through the Mediterranean-inspired space looked cracked and unkempt.

Outside, the generous front and back yards fleshing out the double-lot property were drowning in a sea of dead plants and an untamed crush of tamarisk trees swarmed over the rough driveway that led to a long-forgotten casita.

When Williams and Dreese happened upon the property after dining in Palm Springs, they didn’t see a dilapidated house and gardening nightmare; they saw a delightful Mediterranean villa that needed some spit and polish, a lot of sweat, and a considerable amount of cash. They believed that beyond the tarnish gleamed a brilliant architectural gem. “We saw the house and immediately fell in love,” Williams recalls. “Immediately,” his partner confirms.

But it wasn’t love that motivated the couple to sign on the dotted line; it was Williams’ mother. “We didn’t initially buy the house for us,” Williams says. “But my mom was getting older and living alone in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. So when we saw it, we thought, ‘This is perfect,’ and asked her to move to California.”

With self-contained upstairs and downstairs living areas, complete with kitchens, private entries and bathrooms, the house was tailor-made for Williams’ elderly mother Joan to live out her days in stylish comfort while surrounded by family. He and Dreese took the apartment upstairs and mom occupied the downstairs main house until her passing last year. “She said it was the most beautiful house and garden she had ever lived in,” Williams remembers.

The men, who own and operate the lucrative landscaping company Mojave Rock Ranch, have renovated more than a dozen homes, so they know what it took to bring out a property’s best. “We can see
through all kinds of stuff,” Dreese says. “We’re not the kind of guys who like a house that’s completely done.” Williams quips, “We actually like it all crapped up.”

Their first task after purchasing the 2,500-square-foot house in 2008 for the listing price of $600,000 ($585,000 after repair credits) was making Joan’s living space habitable. It took them about three months to restore the downstairs quarters, which consisted of two bedrooms, a dining room, kitchen, sunroom and cozy living room with a fireplace. Over time, they have remodeled the upstairs unit, making it very comfortable, airy and fully functional for guests and visitors. They revamped the sunroom, where they spend much of their time with the doors open to the backyard garden and pool, and are almost finished with the casita. So far, they surmise they’ve invested about $200,000 into the redo. This summer, they plan to festoon the casita’s outer wall with Mediterranean plates. “We’re going to need 200 or so, but it’s going to look great,” Williams says. “One more reason to go to consignment shops!”

Outside, the pair transformed the withered front yard into a vibrant drought-tolerant garden teeming with desert plants, succulents, cacti, blooming perennials, exotic citrus and tufts of lavender. Upstairs, ice plants dangle from iron shelving outside the windows. An above-ground pond accommodates a bale of red-eared slider turtles, 15 and counting, who enjoy sunning themselves on a large rock protruding from the water as the family dog Mar observes in rapt curiosity. In the back, a koi pond is also home to a large crayfish that occasionally scuttles across the deck into the pool.

They named their art deco Mediterranean retreat Villa Vecchia (Italian for “old villa”), affirmed by an aged sign discovered in a consignment shop. They incorporated a bluebird to the sign because they were Joan’s favorite. Passers-by who see the “Villa Vecchio” insignia jutting out from the second-story balcony often wonder about the distinctive two-story dwelling so prominent among the smaller Spanish-style homes on the street. “A lot of people ask if it’s an inn or a bed and breakfast,” Dreese says. “But we’re very spoiled,” he teases. “It’s all for us.” The lighthearted energy infusing Villa Vecchio is palpable, as is the passion that sparked the home’s new life. Coupled for 31 years, Williams and Dreese genuinely enjoy being together — and they’d better. “We live together and we work together,” Dreese says. “And we’re still crazy about each other.”

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Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch…

Before there was Villa Vecchio, there was Mojave Rock Ranch — Troy Williams and Gino Dreese’s inimitable rock and bottle house designed with an African lodge in mind. Situated on 225 acres of unspoiled Mojave Desert in Joshua Tree among boulders and dry washes, the ranch boasts incredible views and alluring cactus gardens. Mojave Rock Ranch is also the name of the couple’s landscaping company.

They are also crazy about collecting rocks. “Every rock tells a story,” Dreese explains. “We have them from all over the world, everywhere we go, and we cement them into our place in Joshua Tree.” But their gift for repurposing found items into whimsical designs doesn’t stop there. They incorporate tiles, driftwood, rusty tools, old toys and dinnerware — basically other people’s refuse — into unique additions to homes and gardens. A couch made of old bottles adorns their Joshua Tree ranch, and at Villa Vecchio, colorful glass pieces cobbled together from bottles enhance a bathroom window.

The couple’s artistic handiwork, green thumbs and enviable knack for invention brighten almost every corner of their Palm Springs Mediterranean hideaway. Cobblestone interior walls and bucolic arches give the home an Old World feel, and an eclectic assortment of furniture and accessories culled from their travels and consignment shops enrich the pastoral ambiance.

“You know how travel magazines suggest you pack light, take only what you need?” Williams queries. “We’re the opposite. We travel heavy. We come back with rocks, books, all kinds of stuff.”

Dreese nods and playfully adds, “We would rather leave our clothes behind.”