

# An ADIRONDACK STYLE LODGE on a KIAWAH MARSH

STORY BY DIANE McMAHON PHOTOGRAPHY BY NANCY McGREGOR



## I LOVE HOUSE TOURS.

They harness our unbounded curiosity about other people's lives and houses to a philanthropic purpose. When a member of the auxiliary group of Charleston's Gibbes Museum of Art knocked on George and Janet Desko's front door and convinced them to "lend" their house to the 2013 Kiawah Art and House Tour, she won the Triple Crown of house tours: a spectacular house; a beautiful setting; and generous owners willing to open their home to the public.

I am lucky enough to get a sneak preview. From the street the house appears long and low-lying with only a five step rise to the front door. The exterior, influenced by rustic Adirondack architecture, combines stained cedar shingles in a deep dark green with mahogany doors and windows to let "the house disappear into the landscape." Tucked behind South Carolina palmettos, the garage's intricate brick work, copper downspouts, patina brass carriage lamps and carved shutters occasion a child walking by to say, "Look! That's Harry Potter's house."

I walk up the brick path. A 400-year-old live oak anchors the landscape that gives the house an air of permanence, despite being completed in July of 2010. I press an intercom doorbell and Janet opens the Honduran mahogany front door. This is a moment everyone lucky enough to go on the Kiawah Art and House Tour will remember. The sheer volume of light and space arrests me momentarily. The subtle, dark exterior gives way to a richly detailed Georgian interior. My eye moves through a colonnade of white enameled columns and arched thresholds opening into the living area, dining area and kitchen, and continues out the back window wall, past the infinity pool to the tidal marsh, the Kiawah River and John's Island in the distance. I look up 20 feet to the foyer's commanding murano glass chandelier.

*I have just stepped into a sensory banquet...*

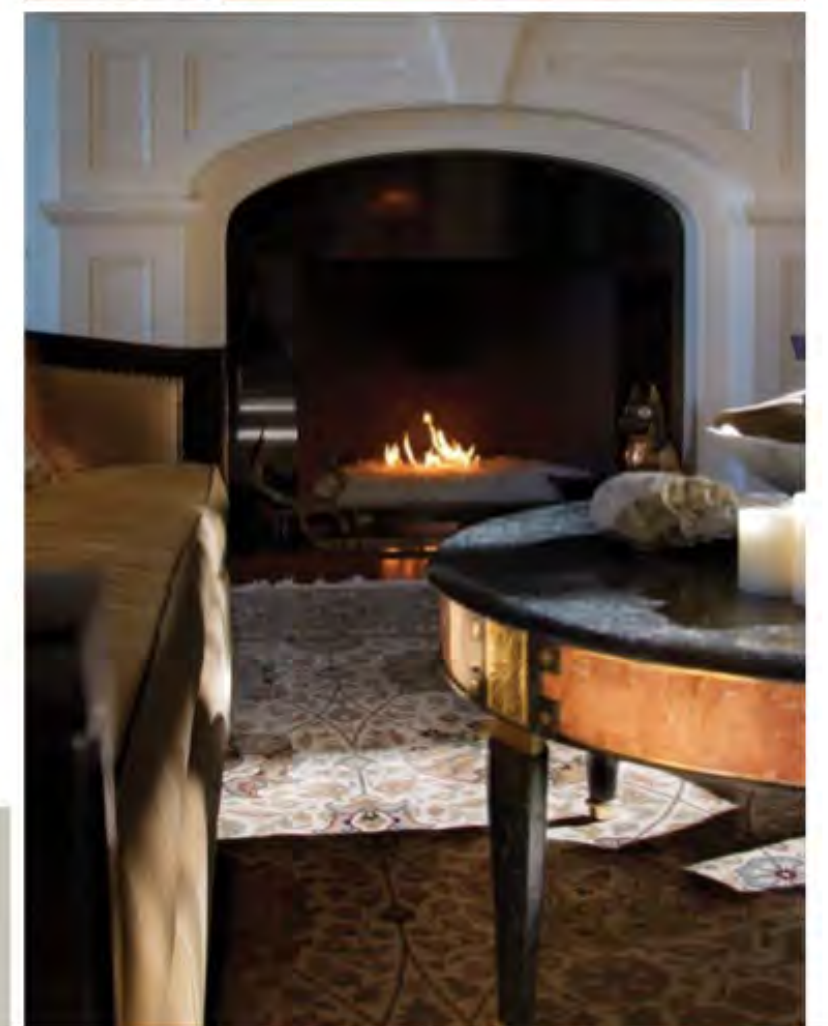




George joins us, while I stand fixated in the foyer. I have asked them for a little background before we tour the house. We sit at their 13-foot-long kitchen island looking out at the salt marsh and Kiawah River. They are fun, energetic and youthful. Their conversation has the easy give-and-take of a couple with a long shared history who still enjoy each other. Their romance began during a Fourth of July weekend in the mid-60s on a New Jersey beach when Janet asked George—a stranger on break from Penn State—to put oil on her back. They married May 4, 1968. Their personal story is the best of the *American Dream*: love, faith, family, ambition, partnership, hard work, success. I am regaled with enough plot twists and adventures to complete a blockbuster, but that is their story to tell.

They discovered Kiawah in 1984, bought a house and sold it in '88 when their base of business operations changed. They returned in 1994 and bought the house originally at this current address. George says, "I love the marsh and how it changes. The ocean view is great for a couple of hours, but you can't turn it off." Later, they bought the adjacent lot and reluctantly decided to tear down the original house. Janet says, "I couldn't come to see it being torn down, but I made sure everything that could be re-used went to *Habitat for Humanity*." Construction began in 2008. Every piece of interior architectural paneling and trim was done on site. It took two years to complete this house but Janet insists "it's still a work in progress." They divide their time between Kiawah and their home outside of Pittsburgh, Pa.

In 1979 Janet bought half-interest in a friend's furniture company, *Distinctive Furniture*. It has afforded her years of design experience, great sources and an ability to find the right people to work with. The Deskos speak highly of both their builder (Steve Brenner, Solaris Inc.) and architect (Skip Wallace, Island Architects). As we walk through the 12,500-square-foot house (8,400 heated) I begin to comprehend the magnitude of design decisions this house required. The sense of cohesion and comfort that unifies the house masks the architectural complexity.







There are multi-levels with seven full baths and two half-baths (we all wonder if this equals eight). The master suite, above the garage, is at a 45 degree angle to the main house to maximize views of the marsh and river. There are two junior master suites at the opposite end of the house and a children's level with a playroom and boys' suite and girls' suite for the four grandchildren. There are two elevators, two interior staircases, an exterior spiral staircase, three laundry areas, a state-of-the art home theatre, a pub room, a den, an office. Somehow they managed to make a grand house fun and uniquely quirky. It took a skilled and collaborative team to make it happen, one led by a woman who knows what she wants and doesn't want.

Building code requires that houses be 14 feet above flood level but the owners didn't want high steps which would have thwarted their vision of a long, low-lying house. They had tons of dirt fill brought in to allow the gentle gradation that now exists. Janet doesn't like shelves.

"I'm a big picture person. I can't stand all those doodads that fill them up." In lieu of shelves in one of the wall niches flanking her living room fireplace, she designed an original multi-piece, multi-colored glass sculpture. It's a showpiece. Her point is made.

She designed the kitchen herself. The island's elliptical top is Black Absolute granite. She tells me, "I chose this because I don't want *any* pattern or movement in my kitchen granite. It fights with the food and makes it unappetizing." The gleaming 13 foot island (which looks only slightly shorter than a small craft landing strip) is in perfect scale to the elongated kitchen. The 12 foot coffered ceiling contains the contrasting dark and light cabinetry in distressed finishes of tri-corn black and tapioa with accents in old world red, part of Habersham Custom Cabinetry's signature line. She managed to find kitchen chandeliers that are magically massive in size and buoyant in feeling.





Oh, one more thing. The garage. Resting on a hand-painted checkered race flag is a Ferrari 458 whose color—italia-rosso mugello—is just slightly deeper than the renowned “Ferrari racing red.” George calls it a “street car” and drives it to do errands. In 1998 George and Janet added race car driving to their lives as a hobby and have posted over 40,000 race miles in Ferrari challenge cars. Behind a grey metal grate door, George reveals his subterranean man-cave and an impressive collection of car and racing memorabilia.

Like their house, the Deskos blend some opposite styles. Their down to earth, straightforward side seems

equally at ease with their unabashed pleasure in “over-the top.” It is believable they are “grateful custodians of God’s country” and obvious they have fun enjoying and sharing their good fortune. They will be on hand to greet visitors during the house tour. It’s a pleasure you shouldn’t miss.

A picture is worth a thousand words, but even our photographs can’t cover everything. I encourage you to buy a ticket for the 2013 Kiawah Art and House Tour and experience all of it for yourself. I’ve even been tipped off *this* is the house where refreshments are being served.

2013 KIAWAH ART AND HOUSE TOUR  
Friday, April 5, 2013 at 1 to 5 p.m.

Tickets: \$55 per person and include the 5-house tour, light refreshments throughout the afternoon at one of the homes and an admission pass to the Gibbes Museum of Art valid through Dec. 30, 2013. Tickets available at: Kiawah Island Real Estate offices located at Freshfields, Kiawah’s Main Gate and The Sanctuary

For more information: Gibbes Museum of Art 135 Meeting St. Charleston, SC 29401  
843.722.2706, ext. 22 | gibbesmuseum.org/events



Janet insisted on having mahogany windows and doors. She did her research and discovered Bildau & Busmann, a European supplier to Muhler Company located in Charleston, S.C. She had to get her builder and architect onboard, but these custom windows and doors are a key architectural element that harmonize the rustic Adirondack style exterior with the elegant Georgian interior. The back exterior wall runs the length of the kitchen, dining area and living room. Its series of mahogany trimmed glass doors and transoms frame the marsh view, creating a panoramic gallery.

A complete article could be devoted to Janet’s selection of fabrics and upholstered pieces (she credits Old Hickory Tannery, Hickory, NC.) and lighting fixtures (Cyan Design and Curry & Co.) She loves Australian sheepskin. Look for it on pillows and bar stools throughout the house. George makes me guess what’s on the floor in the upstairs pine paneled den. It’s a bison skin rug.

THERE ARE TOO MANY “MUST SEES” TO DESCRIBE.  
BUT HERE ARE A FEW...

- The pub room paneled floor to ceiling in mahogany, with matching 200-year-old bronze grille doors salvaged from a Philadelphia bank, a bank of TV monitors for the family sports enthusiasts and an old-world ambience that caused their daughter-in-law to remark, “I actually feel like I went somewhere.”
- The home theatre which they refer to as “The Bordello” and admit is the most used room in the house.
- The master bathroom clad in Calacatta marble (nearly impossible to get) with a 1,750-pound slipper tub hewn out of a single piece of granite, angled to face the marsh and warmed by a miniature wall fireplace. (George smiles and says, “I like bubbles.”)
- The master dressing room concealed behind the frosted glass door; a chandeliered corridor of floor to ceiling cabinetry that could be straight from the Palace of Versailles.
- The decorative glass tiles in the pool that mirror the glass tiles in the kitchen and burnish to a coppery glow in the evening sunset.
- The marsh scene mural painted by Charleston artist Gale Ray that traverses morning till night as it ascends the glassed-in elevator shaft.