

*the PBI profile*



# FANTASY

PATRICK CLINE

## ISLAND

*Celerie Kemble taps her Palm Beach roots to create a sun-dappled, magical sanctuary on the Dominican Republic's wild coast*

By Daphne Nikolopoulos | Portraits by Vanessa Rogers

In the wild north of the Dominican Republic, night falls swiftly beneath the shadow of the mountains. A dark path winds through tropical foliage that touches passersby with soft green fingers. Crickets trill and, somewhere in the distance, the surf sighs. There's a sense of mystery here, the good kind.

At the end of the path, the scene unfolds like a chapter from an Isabel Allende novel. Slivers of light escape from gingerbread fretwork and delicate shutters, underscoring the dual nature of pretty little things. Beams from perforated metal lanterns tremble upon wood siding and cast strange and wonderful shadows on the tile floor. A rogue breeze stirs the petals of night-blooming jasmine, releasing a scent synonymous with the tropics—and the promise of something deliciously civilized in the midst of untamed nature.



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**LEFT: THE UPPER-LEVEL LOUNGE AT PLAYA GRANDE BEACH CLUB DEMONSTRATES KEMBLE'S TALENT FOR MIXING TEXTURES AND STYLES. THE FABRICS, A BLEND OF VINTAGE BATIKS, IKATS, AND DUTCH-AFRICAN WAX PRINTS, CELEBRATE A BOHEMIAN-ETHNIC SENSIBILITY. "THERE'S A SOFTER HOMOGENY WHEN YOU PUT IT ALL TOGETHER," SHE SAYS.**

friend of the couple, the late Delio Gonzalez, showed them a 2,000-acre parcel near Río San Juan, on the country's north coast. It was everything Curry and Kemble had been looking for. And it was for sale.

"It had the most beautiful, long, white chunky-sanded beach that blew our minds, plus a jaw-dropping golf course, the mountains, and a dramatic rainforestry aspect," Kemble says. "None of us could believe that [existed] within three hours of New York City and two-and-a-half hours of Palm Beach."

The deal was on the table for only two weeks. "We had to aggregate friends and friends of friends in order to purchase the property before it was taken off," Kemble recalls. Curry, a well-connected money manager in New York City, assembled a group of investor friends that included actress Mariska Hargitay, architect Richard Meier, and fashion designer Lela Rose.

"People bought it sight unseen with the idea that if we were crazy enough to do it, they would go along with us," Kemble says. "It was fast and almost spastic, but it never would have happened if it wasn't such a standout property."

Fast-forward 11 years to the November 2015 opening of Playa Grande Beach Club, an ocean-front enclave of Dominican-vernacular bungalows owned by the original investors and operating as a resort. Kemble, a New York- and Palm Beach-based interior designer of considerable renown, had the rare opportunity to be both client and decorator, which gave her an exhilarating freedom. Not surprisingly, she imprinted the project with her signature style of marrying the quirky and the beautiful.

Foremost on her mind was a reverence for the land. Macro to micro, everything had to relate to the beach, the sun, the breezes, and the jungle. And it had to be respectful of Dominican style and lifestyle, so it wouldn't feel like yet another British or Spanish colonial structure plunked down in remote territory.

Over years of research, Kemble and her team culled the best of Dominican architecture: the rustic charm of farmhouses, the graceful elements of Puerto Plata Victorian homes, and the delicate features of French Victorian island residences. It



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**THE TILE PATTERNS (ABOVE AND RIGHT) ARE INSPIRED BY THE PORTUGUESE TILES IN KEMBLE'S CHILDHOOD HOME. BELOW: A COPPER GATE LEADS TO THE JUNGLE, WHERE MORE BUNGALOWS WILL BE BUILT.**



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If it seems like someone's exquisite island fantasy, it's because it was. Palm Beach native Celerie Kemble and her husband, Boykin Curry, had searched for this utopia for so long, it had started to feel like nothing more than a myth.

"Boykin had been obsessed with looking around the world for interesting places that might make an ideal vacation home," Kemble says. "What 'ideal' meant to him was a place where we wouldn't be entirely isolated. It had to be accessible, beautiful, and a wise investment. It became a pastime looking for this imaginary location."

This went on for some time—until a Dominican



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**"I have traveled and have seen many architectural styles, but I still think the houses I grew up in have magic to them."**



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THE THREE-BEDROOM BUNGALOWS LIVE LIKE PRIVATE VACATION HOMES, WITH DINING ROOMS (ABOVE), LIVING ROOMS (LEFT), AND WALLS THAT GIVE WAY TO PORCHES.

all came together in a style Kemble calls “garden fantastical,” an enchanted mélange of pale aqua corrugated zinc roofs, *tabla de palma* (split heart of palm wood) siding, shuttered windows and bifold doors that open to the elements, and *tragaluz* (patterned woodwork) transoms that swallow and disperse light.

But it wouldn’t be a Kemble design if it didn’t in some way invoke Palm Beach. Her main reference point was Duck’s Nest, her great grandfather’s lakefront house and one of the first homes on Palm Beach. The three-gabled roof of that Victorian kit house is a prominent element in Playa Grande’s three-bedroom bungalows.

Next door to Duck’s Nest, the Old Church—the original Bethesda-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church that was later converted into a residence—was another muse. It’s the house Kemble grew up in and remains the residence of her mother, Mimi McMakin. “The one-bedrooms have this octagonal gazebo-like structure drawn from my bedroom and from my mom’s bedroom, which is under the turret of the church,” she says.

The tile designs that appear throughout the Playa Grande clubhouse, bungalow bathrooms, and porches were borrowed from



“It’s the mix of materials and the layers of things that make it really work.”

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CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: ONE-BEDROOM BUNGALOWS FEATURE BIFOLD DOORS THAT OPEN COMPLETELY TO THE ELEMENTS. THE WICKER DAY BED THAT ONCE WAS IN KEMBLE’S GUEST ROOM HAS MIGRATED TO PLAYA GRANDE. PRETTY GARDEN ELEMENTS LIKE TRELLISES AND TRAGALUZ BALUSTRADES CONTRIBUTE TO THE ENCHANTMENT.

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beach. Guests are free to roam and discover. Children, especially, love that. “There’s even a manny who teaches the kids how to surf or to catch crabs for the crab races at night,” McMakin says. “The play is reduced to the way it was: simple and very happy.”

At the beach club, even the furnishings speak of joyful childhoods and carefree living. “In Palm Beach, we’ve always had a mix of some old, some new, some amusing,” McMakin says. “Like the furnishings Celerie grew up with, everything looks as if it’s been treasured.”

It’s not surprising that many of the pieces came from local stores. “There are a lot of weird wicker animals, side tables with turtles or frogs, and art that I bought from vintage sales or auctions [in West Palm Beach’s Antique Row],” Kemble says. “A good third of what I bought has cycled through the old houses in Palm Beach.”

Much of the design is based on Kemble’s memories. Case in point: a four-poster bed with green and white vines that McMakin had made



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for the Red Cross Designers' Show House 20-some years ago. "After the show house ended, it became my bed in Palm Beach," Kemble says. "It's still one of the most beautiful things ever. I brought the idea to the [local] ironworker," who created a similar bed in copper and iron.

The same man—a Puerto Plata artisan named Neno—crafted the copper bathtubs, light fixtures, and hardware

throughout the property. That was central to Kemble's grand plan. "I wanted the place to look old," she says. "Everything we put in had to be aged or have the ability to age in a charming direction. There's nothing prettier or more gentle-garden than the green patina of copper."

The charm of Playa Grande Beach Club is a testament to Kemble's talent for mixing high and low, new and old, bold and delicate in a way that is studied yet comes across as insouciant, effortless. "It's the mix of materials and the layers of things that make it really work," she says. "They are all distinctive words that make a meaningful poem."

Kemble's "poem" has been developed through years of travel, keen observation, and her own genteel upbringing. And in many ways, this property is its apogee.

"With Playa Grande, I wanted to create something we would all feel sentimental about and carried away by,"



TOP TO BOTTOM: THE "FANCIFUL, WHIMSICAL, CRAZY BEACH PAVILION" OF KEMBLE'S DREAMS MATERIALIZES AT THE PLAYA GRANDE CLUBHOUSE. THE TWO-STORY STRUCTURE HOUSING THE LIBRARY AND LOUNGE REITERATES THE DESIGN VOCABULARY OF DOMINICAN FRETWORK, SHUTTERS, AND AMPLE WRAPAROUND PORCHES. MEALS ARE TAKEN ALFRESCO ON A CHARMING TERRACE OVERLOOKING THE BEACH.

she says. "There's a sense of whimsical irreverence that makes you feel light-hearted and careless against the backdrop of rugged weather, strong sun, big winds and waves, and huge trees. It's something delicate and romantic inside that wild world."

And there is more to come. In development is a series of "jungalows," which will be more rustic and natural—a bit like chic tree houses—to play off their location in the forested part of the property. They will have a different feeling entirely but will keep with the mantra of nature superseding anything man-made.

Although the raw beauty of the D.R.'s north coast is the protagonist on Kemble's stage, the property's "small prettinesses"—the hammocks swinging in the breeze, the wicker chairs that have weathered just so, the dappled light of mid-afternoon—play an important supporting role in the experience.

"You do feel small against nature but cosseted by the many delicacies around you," she says. "It's highly designed, yet it doesn't feel formal. There's a sense of silliness that tells [you] you don't have to have your shoes on or your hair brushed."

"There's a great deal of whimsy and fantasy, which is a necessity when you're on vacation," McMakin adds. "Something that is so comfortable and joyful takes a tremendous amount of planning. Each piece is carefully sought out. It makes you say, 'Isn't this lovely? Isn't it fun?'" <<

Hair: Gregory Ash Yomontano, Deborah Koepper Beauty, Palm Beach  
 Makeup: Deborah Koepper using Deborah Koepper cosmetics, Deborah Koepper Beauty, Palm Beach  
 Wardrobe: Lela Rose, New York  
 Location: The McMakin residence, Palm Beach



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