

...and the house was built in 1950. The house was built on a small island in the middle of the ocean. The house was built on a small island in the middle of the ocean. The house was built on a small island in the middle of the ocean.



ESCAPE TO AN ISLAND

# FLORIDA SHACK

An L.A. casting director rescues the tiny, no-frills vacation house of her childhood, and rebuilds it as a relaxing escape and a salute to the colorful characters of her family's past

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HISTORIC IMAGES: COURTESY OF HOMEOWNER



In Lora Kennedy's open kitchen, orange accents (like the Blue Star range and Barn Light Electric pendants) sync with the fiery shades of Gulf sunsets in view as she cooks. Opposite, clockwise from top: The cottage, rebuilt 12½ feet off the ground to protect it from storm surge; a short, sandy path to the sea; the original 1950s cottage; Kennedy (standing) with her mother, sister, and grandfather outside the house in the mid-1970s







When Lora Kennedy was a kid, her mother told her there was nothing the ocean couldn't heal. "She always said coming here could fix anything," recalls Kennedy, who would climb into her parents' Chevy Impala every summer for the three-hour drive from Orlando to Anna Maria Island, a seven-mile barrier island south of Tampa, Florida. Their destination: a 900-square-foot cottage across the street from the beach, with no insulation and no air-conditioning. Children far outnumbered bedrooms, so the kids slept on the porch. "We'd push cots up against the wall, leave the windows open all night," she says. "There were fans everywhere, but you could still hear the waves, the occasional car whoosh by. That's how you got to sleep."

This was the 1960s and '70s, before Kennedy headed west and began building a career in Hollywood. She's an executive vice president of casting for Warner Brothers now. The same girl who used to tiptoe out from the cottage at 6 a.m. with a cane pole to fish for Spanish mackerel off the pier has since cast blockbusters including *Argo*, *Justice League*, and *Wonder Woman*.

And yet her most important project to date is thousands of miles from Tinseltown. A couple of years ago, she decided to rebuild the old family cottage. It had been a gift to Kennedy's great-grandmother from her children, all of whom lived relatively close by: Her grandparents owned a curios shop at the base of the Sunshine Skyway bridge, and her great-aunt Frannie was a jazz singer who sang in local clubs. "I'd watch Frannie and her





The mid-century-style sofa and ottoman in the great room are by Thrive Home Furnishings; Kennedy found the telephone table at a swap meet.



Kennedy's great aunt, Francis Caldwell (below and left), was a jazz singer who lived in the original cottage until she was 96. In 1946, she wrote a song called "Florida Shack," which can be heard even today on Apple Music.



The flooring is wear-resistant porcelain tile that mimics the look of wood. The lighting pendant is crafted of old crab trap netting.



From left: Kennedy's great-aunt Frannie, grandmother Mildred, and great-grandmother Florence



sisters sit around the cottage, smoking cigarettes and singing the old standards," she says. "My favorite was 'Red Sails in the Sunset.'"

After Kennedy's great-grandmother passed, Frannie moved into the house. "She walked the beach every day right up until she was 95, and even went parasailing at 93, just so she could see what the island looks like from above," Kennedy says.

But by the time Frannie left the cottage to move inland, years had worn on the house. The wood siding was weather-beaten, it had mold and asbestos, and though the family had added air-conditioning in the '80s, the house was as leaky as a sieve. "In the bathroom, you could see the sand underneath the house around where the pipe connected," Kennedy says. She hired architect Jody Beck of Tampa-based Traction Architecture to fix up the old house, but what began as a renovation quickly turned into a rebuild. "Strict storm codes made a rehab nearly impossible, and structurally, it needed a lot of work," Beck says. "We decided to replace the house with something stronger, but similar."

"Similar" might be understating it. "The footprint is exactly the same," says Kennedy. She wanted everything in the same place as in the original home—the two bedrooms on the south end of the house, a kitchen in the rear, and a porch facing the ocean. And it still has just one bath. They positioned the windows in the same place, too; "we just added more of them," says Beck. For the furnishings, Kennedy liked the idea of mixing oranges and greens. "When the sun sets, the green of the Gulf hits the orange sky, and the view really connects with the house," adds the architect. The one addition? Beck's team designed a loft bedroom overlooking the great room—so nobody has to sleep on the porch anymore.

They reused some materials from the original house, such as the beadboard from the porch (now paneling in the bath) and a pair of interior doors. "These doors were always special to me; I don't know why," says Kennedy. "Maybe because they are so solid. Even if that house had crumbled, these doors would have lasted forever."

With so much family history here, forever was the plan. Beck and her team crafted the pilings and beams of poured concrete, used strong fiber-cement siding, and chose a metal 5V crimp roof (known for its strength in storms). "We chose every material for maximum durability," says Beck. It's been tested already, with September's Hurricane Irma disrupting only the trees around the rebuilt cottage. Still, within days of the storm, Kennedy hopped a flight from California. "I knew the house was fine, but I needed to check on it for myself," she says. "I spent a few days cleaning up around the yard. We designed it to be exceptionally strong, so it will be here for our kids, and it really is."

It's the same beach house in spirit. Black-and-white family photos grace the walls; old record collections stack up along shelving. Aunt Frannie's voice even sails through the rooms, singing a song she wrote in 1946. Its title is "Florida Shack."

Last year, Kennedy made the trip to the island nearly every month, often with her 14-year-old son, Orlando. Her family meets her there when they can. "When we arrive, we walk over and say hi to the beach. When we leave, we go say goodbye to it." They pick up trash on the sand, stir up cocktails, and play cards on the porch. "It's true that there's nothing that water can't heal," Kennedy says. "Coming back as adults, it's the same idea. I can stand in the water, climb in a kayak, paddleboard along the shore, and everything just melts away."



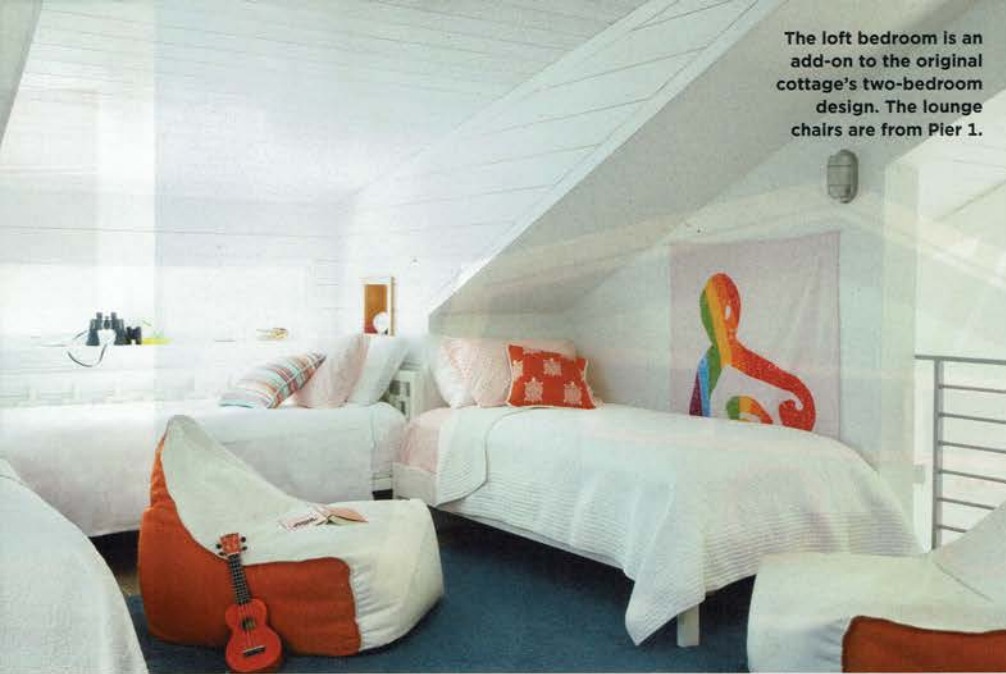
The beadboard paneling in the bath is recycled from the porch of the original cottage.



The master bedroom's iron bed is from Pottery Barn; the bedside lamps are male and female surfers handed down from a friend.



The loft bedroom is an add-on to the original cottage's two-bedroom design. The lounge chairs are from Pier 1.



The outdoor shower is painted Navel by Sherwin-Williams. The rain-style shower-head is by Moen.

## FIVE MORE EASY ESCAPE ISLANDS

These five islands—with dreamy beaches, big views, and small-town charms—provide paradise that's just a bridge (or quick ferry ride) away.

### 1 AMELIA ISLAND, FLORIDA

**Median home price: \$342,500**

Old Florida at its best, this barrier island on the Atlantic coast just across the bridge from Jacksonville contains a lively, 50-block historic downtown, 13 miles of unspoiled beaches, and wildlife-filled nature preserves ideal for hiking, biking, and kayaking.

### 2 GIBSON ISLAND, MARYLAND

**Median home price: \$2.2 million**

It's a haven for those seeking solitude among nature: The private Chesapeake Bay community is less than an hour from Baltimore, but more than two-thirds of its 920 lush acres is set aside for recreation.

### 3 BALBOA ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

**Median home price: \$2.1 million**

Mom-and-pop stores, colorful beach cottages, and nearly two miles of boardwalk make this exclusive isle in the midst of Newport Harbor a perfect mix of classic Americana and SoCal cool.

### 4 BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, WASHINGTON

**Median home price: \$862,000**

The Puget Sound enclave is just a 35-minute ferry ride from Seattle and contains big-city amenities—farm-to-table eateries, artisan wineries, even an orchestra—all in a peaceful, rustic setting with spectacular Mt. Rainier views.

### 5 DAUFUSKIE ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA

**Median sale price: \$220,750**

With no cars and miles of beautiful beachfront, unwinding is easy on this Lowcountry charmer, a 25-minute boat ride from Savannah. The island's private Haig Point community offers a golf course and multiple restaurants.

—Jennifer Ceaser, former editor-in-chief, *Islands* magazine