

# HEAVEN ON EARTH

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Like another couple before them, Don and Irene Ashley were not consciously destined for the rugged peninsula at the western end of this island.

But a happenstance drive while on vacation here in 1998 led the Ashleys to the same point, Steele Point, as the original owners of the property some 20 years earlier, and to the same conclusion: they had found heaven on earth.

"It was so unique and so breathtaking and so wonderful for us, we thought this is an opportunity we could never pass up," Don Ashley recalled upon first viewing the cliffs and palms, orchids and pools of Steele Point.

Irene agrees. "When you look out from that point and see the two oceans meet, see the current, it takes your breath away," she says. "It's a special place, not just in the Caribbean, but on the planet."

The Ashleys' timing was apt. The original owner, New York banker and sculptor Benson Selzer, had died just weeks prior to their accidental visit.

*Previous page: A view of Steele Point situated on the most westerly point on the island of Tortola.*

*Above: One of the main pavilions housing the kitchen, a bedroom and the living room. Angled brackets and braces support this overhanging pavillion.*

*Right: Owners Irene & Don Ashley with Princess Dorritt, left.*

*Opposite page: An outdoor breakfast patio with incredible views of the ocean.*







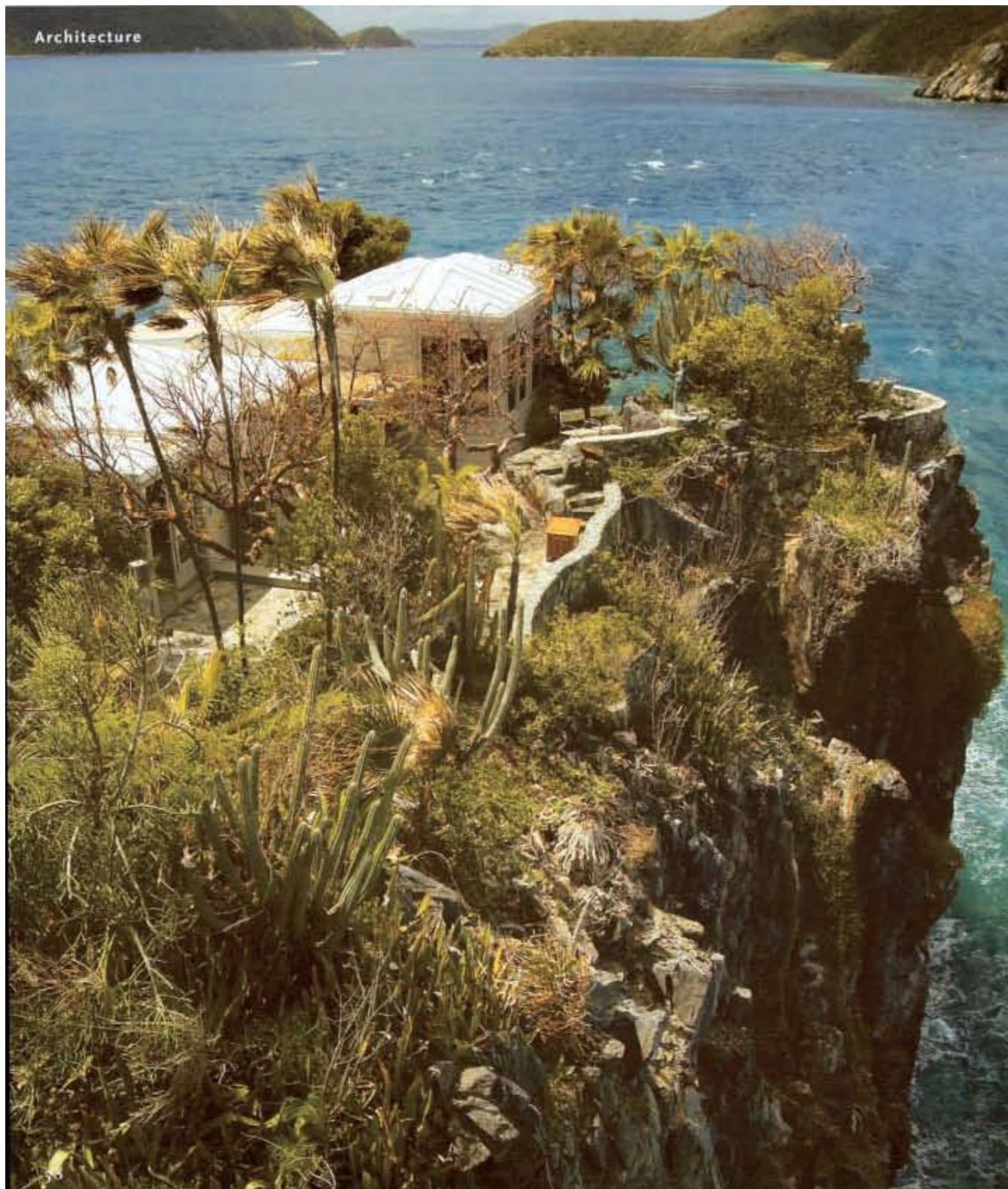
*Clockwise from top left: Curved lounge sitting on a secret patio at the cliff's edge; tucked on a ledge, this private bedroom overlooks dramatic cliffs and sea views; a gazebo with a staircase leads down to another section of the estate.*











The Philadelphia couple set about purchasing the eight-acre plot, the spectacular main four-bedroom villa and adjacent guesthouse, known as the Gestalt. Two years later, in 2000, the deal was done. Following a restoration and expansion, the Ashleys opened Steele Point and Gestalt for rent.

Local architect Michael Helm oversaw the restoration. It was a familiar project, as he was Selzer's original designer of Steele Point.

The 4,200-square-foot main house is actually a series of pavilions on different levels of a 100-foot cliff. To keep it from toppling into the sea below, the builders "stitched" the house into the rocks underneath, using 20-foot steel rods. Its levels are connected via stairwells and bridges. Angled brackets and braces support overhanging decks and rooms.

To protect the structure from the elements, Helm used red cypress wood, resistant to rot and insects. The wood was sandblasted to resemble driftwood.

Selzer had told Helm he wanted to awaken in the morning in his sea-level bedroom, tumble out of bed and into the water for a swim. He would ascend to an upper level for breakfast. His climb would conclude at the top tier, his sculpture studio, 100 feet above the surf. At the end of the day, he would reverse his trek.

In building the structure, Helm tried to maintain existing vegetation, including palms and sea grape trees, oleander hedges, and mango trees. Little excavation was required. "The house is tailored to this site," Helm says. "It's a very gentle guest on the point."

The restoration was gentle as well. The house had become weathered in the time between owners, but was structurally sound. The Ashleys also wanted to update its furnishings and prepare it for luxury rental for the eight or nine months a year when they are home in Philadelphia.

"It took nine months to bring it back to prime condition," says

Don Ashley, whose background is on Wall Street and who now owns a distribution business and various real estate holdings. "Like a beautiful sailboat, it had gotten weather worn."

Workers installed new marble floors and outfitted the house with Balinese style furnishings. Bronze sculptures pepper the newly tended gardens, including a new orchid garden. The Ashleys purchased new linens and china, and renovated and expanded some of the bedrooms and kitchen spaces. The old sculpture studio is now a master suite with stunning wraparound views of yachts sailing around the island below.

The Gestalt, meanwhile, was refurbished to a Mediterranean villa, with open-air rooms and lush gardens and a private pool. Steel Point can accommodate up to 10 guests, while Gestalt, meanwhile, can be had for US \$2,900 to US \$6,900 per week, again depending on the season. It can accommodate up to eight guests.

Both come with private beaches, pools and docks equipped for boating, fishing and snorkeling. Between the two properties, there are 15 landscaped decks and overlooks from which one can watch the dolphins, sea turtles and stingrays swim below.

Maid service is provided and a private chef is available. Both properties come with all the necessities of contemporary living, including entertainment center, office equipment, and laundry facility. ■

*Previous pages, clockwise from top left: A typical scene from this bedroom at Steele Point; an elegantly appointed bedroom on the lower deck; an open-air shower off one of the private bedrooms.*

*Opposite page: An overhead view of the main house surrounded by vegetation.*

*Above: Incredible sunset views can be seen at Steele Point.*