



COASTAL CHIC

When Sarah and her family immigrated to Australia and moved into an old fixer-upper cottage by the sea, she decided to start a blog to document their renovation journey.

STORY BY TAMARA STANLEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY POTTER



LEFT: The patchy walls were rejuvenated with lashings of crisp, white paint.

ABOVE: Sarah used printed hessian sacks to cover some cushions – it adds texture to the room and contrasts nicely with the white sofa and walls.

Sarah and her husband had always enjoyed spending Sundays picnicking at their local beach in Southern England. “For lunch we’d grill sardines and, as the sun set and the tide went out, we’d walk along the shoreline,” Sarah recalls. Since moving to Australia, she’s kept the beach-going tradition alive.

The couple bought a “tatty old beach cottage” in a seaside Aussie town a couple of years ago. It was a bold move for Sarah as she’d always resided in one village. “Life was quite comfortable for us in England, but something was missing,” Sarah says, so in 2005 they embarked on a mission to create a new life by the sea. “We knew nothing about Australia, other than it was a long, long way from home; it had sunny beaches that were part of everyday life, and a friend of ours had sent us pictures of it.” After several months of phone calls, Internet research, books and conversations with ex-pats, they filled out the paperwork and made their move. “The moment we landed in Australia, I felt like I’d come home,” she recalls.

Sarah cleans and disinfects her rescued items before rubbing them back by hand with rough, then fine, sandpaper. After this, she primes and paints them.



GAINING AN AUDIENCE

The challenges of immigrating to a new country meant funds were limited, so the family purchased a ramshackle cottage. Sarah started writing about the massive renovation process in a blog at www.abeachcottage.com and it now gets 70,000 visits per month. “I describe the adventures I have finding things for our home, and chronicle the makeovers and remodelling projects we take on ourselves,” she says. “I also write about living by the sea.” She believes that in tough economic times it’s nice to have a beautiful home to escape to, where troubles will be forgotten; this is a view that’s shared by many of the people who follow her blog.

“The work is continuous and the preparation slow, but she’s getting there,” Sarah says of the house. “I’ve found my groove and I love how everything’s coming together.” The decorating is being done on a slim budget and Sarah makes over what she’s already got – there’s also fun to be had from scouring local sources for old pieces of furniture and painting them white.

Projects include a beautiful Art Deco cupboard, which she “upcycled and re-purposed” in the hallway, and vintage suitcases found on a treasure-hunting weekend and transformed into a

TOP: A coir rug in the living room bridges the indoors and outdoors and establishes a casual ambience.

RIGHT: Sarah enjoys hunting for shabby treasures and giving them a new purpose.





TOP LEFT: This small wooden bench was a bargain at only one dollar; Sarah promptly whitewashed it and set it in the hall as a place to put everyday items.

TOP RIGHT: Sarah prides herself on arranging table decorations for guests, which she calls “tablescapes”. When not in use, fresh blooms adorn the table.



charming bedside table. “I snuck out one Saturday for a coffee and arrived home with baskets, straw bags, vintage stockpots, herbs, vintage hangers and the suitcases – I almost had an excitement attack,” she laughs.

In the living room, vintage furniture is complemented by hessian and nautical decor.

“I knew that my unique combination of shabby old pieces no-one else seemed to have a love for, and a simple coastal decorating palette of white and neutral colours, would give me quite a nice cottage on a budget,” she says.

FROM TRASH TO TREASURE

The coffee table was a triumph for Sarah. She found it dumped by the side of the road, while out driving with her family, and promptly loaded it on top of the car. When she got it home she painted the legs white. Among her other treasures are vintage linens, tablecloths and faded floral sheets. Sarah thoroughly enjoys hunting for time-worn things that money can’t buy and her home reflects a determined move away from consumerism.

A feeling of warmth and comfort is evident in the house, and Sarah can’t resist candles, in the form of lanterns, tea lights or tapers. She slots them into just about every corner and lights them as the sun sets. Other decorative accents include sea glass and whatever else the ocean casts up. “I love the idea that something is discarded and buffed by the elements, and washed up on the shoreline in a tangle, then gathered up and given pride of place in a home,” she says.



A tiny kitchen caters to the family of five with the inclusion of a magnetic knife strip, hanging mugs and a stool to reach items stored up high.



before



before



Sarah is showing people her house so they know it's possible to make a home comfortable on a budget, and that it's not just attainable for stylists or those with the best houses. She chose a neutral palette, and selected pure white for the walls, going against the recommendation of most designers she'd read about. "The main reason for this was simply because we were in a hurry and it meant no fuss," she laughs. "I'm more than pleased with how it turned out and, in my opinion, it doesn't look like we live in a hospital!"

GO FOR QUALITY

Budget bedroom furniture has always disappointed Sarah, so she sticks to well-made antique pieces. "I want to feel the sturdiness when I open a drawer," she says. She keeps an eye out for sales on good quality, luxury white linen, as it gives the bed a calm feel. "I scrimp in many areas of my life, and get away with it, but in this instance I'd rather save up and spend well," she notes. Sarah also likes having chairs in the bedrooms. "Especially director's ones covered in neutral linen," she says, "or old rattan ones painted white. What I'm looking out for now is an old wing-back chair that I can cover in white. It's on my most-wanted list!"

TOP: Sarah saved money on the bed, which is a reproduction piece, and saved up for an excellent mattress.

LEFT: A professional was employed to sand the floorboards, although Sarah suggests hiring a sander and doing it yourself if you're on a tight budget.



AFTERTHOUGHTS

Sarah feels that if she had to renovate the home again she'd do exactly the same things. Her main concern was the floor, kitchen and outside rendering. "I think flooring is the key to getting everything else in place," she says, "and this is something we looked at closely in the old houses we viewed before buying this one. Our interest really depended on whether there was a wooden floor we could restore." If the couple had a larger budget, they would have also replaced the driveway, roof and window. "This is our next step," she says.

SARAH'S TOP DECORATING TIPS:

- Hunt for cheap vintage treasures in thrift stores and garage sales, and paint them white. It's a slower process than going into a shop and ordering what you fancy, but if you look for long enough, you'll come across some beauties.
- Keep it simple so you can learn which colours and textures go together, and which ones don't.
- Decide on a general decorating theme at the start, like white on white, white with nautical accents or vintage beachy.
- Use moderately priced paint, as the cheaper varieties tend to mark easily.

TOP: Sarah painted and stacked two vintage suitcases to form a bedside table.

TOP RIGHT: An antique dresser and whitewashed chair keep the bedroom feeling calm and simple.

An old ladder was put to use in the bathroom – it saves space and displays towels neatly.

