

# Cottage Life MAGAZINE MARCH / APRIL 2025

Style Ideas

**SEASKY COTTAGES, NAMED** for the surrounding land that stretches from the Gulf of St. Lawrence all the way up a high mountain ridge, offer more than just panoramic views. Beyond the six-cottage compound's coastal-chic interiors, and the sea and the sky that stretch for miles, lies the Kismet story of how these modest residences—similar in style but unique in essence—came to exist on 150 rolling acres of Cape Breton, N.S., coastline.

Stewart Applegath and Bell Fraser, the artsy owners of SeaSky, met at a painting class at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the 1980s. Bell, a Nova Scotian, brought Stewart, a Torontonian, to visit her family in Cape Breton's lush Margaree Valley for a weekend trip one winter. He was smitten—both with the woman and the place. "It was fantastic and the coast was just spectacular," he says. "Bell grew up in this area, and we knew we wanted our own place someday."

Though they didn't imagine they'd live in Cape Breton full-time, the dream of a summer place beckoned. In 1989, after about a year of searching for land to buy along the coast, Stewart purchased a 100-acre plot. The couple let the land sit vacant as they bounced around from Montreal to Chicago to New York for their work and studies. In 1993, while living in Brooklyn, Stewart purchased another 50-acre parcel next to the original 100 acres. That summer, he travelled back to Margaree Valley to visit friends and family—and to build the first cottage, SeaSky, the namesake of the group.

"I wanted to be here on the coast, to have our own place on the island, so I decided we should finally build something," Stewart says. The only problem? He had no real experience. "I was a green Toronto boy. I didn't know much about construction," he says. Stewart enlisted the help of a local carpenter along with a few other tradespeople, plus Bell's brother-in-law, David, a handy DIYer. Craig, Stewart's architect brother, assisted with the design. "I worked with that crew and started picking up skills. I went from being intimidated by a circular saw to being able to use it with confidence and finesse."

The first cottage took a few years to complete, with Stewart commuting to and from New York to help finish the build. Meanwhile, Bell was gaining traction for throwing, firing, and glazing her own pottery. She would craft pieces in the city during the fall and winter, and bring them with her to sell on the island in the summer. >>

MAR/APR 2025 45

## Home from away

One artsy couple, six magical cottages, and a grand return to the Cape Breton coast

BY BETH HITCHCOCK  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
STEWART APPEGATH

### Style Ideas

By 1996, Bell's pottery business had taken off, so the couple decided to open a gallery near their coastal property. The following spring, they committed to staying in Cape Breton year-round. Stewart and Bell quickly realized SeaSky cottage was too small to call home, so they built a larger place on the same property where Stewart furthered his building experience. "Working on that second crew is when I learned general carpentry, how to plan and lay out a structure on paper, and how to choose and order materials," Stewart says. "I left the plumbing and electrical to the pros, though."

When the couple finally moved into their home, they used SeaSky to house visiting friends and family. In 2008, with Bell's pottery business struggling amidst the recession, they decided on a whim to offer the cottage as a rental to others. "That's what started it all," says Stewart. The place was soon booked solid.

Realizing the success of the first rental, Stewart pondered building a second cottage. "I saw another lovely spot on the property that was sort of tucked away, with an incredible view of the beach," he says. That became the site of EaglesPass cottage in 2010. Stewart took over the cottage design this time, leaning on Bell's brother-in-law, David, once more, plus a cadre of local tradespeople.

For Cape, the third cottage built the following year, he acted as general contractor and finished off the interiors. Next came DeepBlueSea in 2013. The building had once been Bell's on-site gallery, but the couple decided to close shop and convert it to their fourth rental cottage, modifying the dwelling with wings for a sunroom on one side and a bedroom and bathroom on the other. Stewart and Bell decided to keep the exterior sign with the name of Bell's business, "Cape Breton Clay," as a unique touch. TumbleSea was built in 2021. TwoBySea completed the roster in 2023.

All six cottages are clad in oh-so-coastal cedar shake shingles. Stewart appreciates the way they age with the weather: "There are strong winds here, and the shingles are in a constant cycle of wet and dry because of the climate. Eventually they look almost pickled." For protection, he added functioning external shutters, barn sliders, and storm doors to some of the cottages. Each cottage also sports a steep pitched roof—a distinctly Maritime touch. "Some of the pitches are at a 45-degree angle or steeper, with peaks as high as 18 feet," he says. >>



Stewart let the land dictate where each of the six cottages would be situated based on factors such as privacy, views, and access. From the deck on EaglesPass (above), vistas of the Gulf of St. Lawrence abound.

### Style Ideas



"We pay attention to design details and how they relate to the Cape Breton coast the same way we do in our own home."

- ◀ Stewart wanted each of the cottages to feel distinctly Maritime, inside and out. "I love the shapes and styles of Cape Breton architecture. All I did was modernize it."
- ◀ "I always meet with every set of guests to make recommendations," says Stewart of the folks who rent his cabins. One of his favourite places is The Dancing Goat, a nearby breakfast and lunch spot known for its homemade dishes and baked goods.
- ▼ For Cape cottage (below), Stewart replicated the design of EaglesPass, making the cottages appear as twins. "I didn't want to reinvent the wheel," he says.



- ◀ Whitewashed walls feature prominently throughout the cottages, an intentional choice by Stewart. "They embody a bright, classically Maritime approach," he says.





The interiors of the cabins have unifying elements as well. Stewart opted for an open-concept design and exposed studs and boards for a rustic look. There's not a sheet of drywall to be found. "Since the cottages are only rented from May to October, and we don't need insulation, I could get away with it," Stewart says. He adds that SeaSky and TwoBySea have woodstoves for extra warmth on chillier nights.

In several of the cottage kitchens, Stewart installed inexpensive Ikea shelves on the walls and paired them with retrofitted Ikea Ivar shelving units below (he cut the units in half and added a counter on top). "It's cost-effective and everything's easily accessible," says Stewart.

In TwoBySea, TumbleSea, EaglesPass, and Cape, he experimented with a wall of corrugated metal sheeting behind the kitchen for a modern look. "I had it left over from the roof on our house," he says. "It reflects light and covers a lot of wall space quickly."

The furniture is a mix of vintage finds—a wicker chair here, a wooden wardrobe there—and modern staples from big-box stores. In every space are books, art, and quirky accents (think toss cushions featuring rowdy raccoons and squawking seagulls dressed as dignitaries). Over in TwoBySea is an old table Stewart smartly fashioned into a bathroom vanity just one day before the cottage was set to be rented out. "Sometimes out of desperation comes inspiration," he says. A few of the cottages have rustic tables with birch legs and tops, handmade by Stewart as well.

The couple sprinkled some of their own work throughout the six cottages too. Stewart's black-and-white paintings hang over the sofas in both SeaSky and Cape cottages. In TumbleSea, a wreath that Bell fashioned from mussel shells is a fan favourite. "People really respond to it!" Stewart says.

"The things in the cottages are considered, not arbitrary," says Bell. "We pay attention to design details and objects, and we think about how they might relate to the coast of Cape Breton the same way we do in our own home."

Stewart says he and Bell are content with the six cottages and have no plans to add a seventh: "TwoBySea was the last hurrah." Though he acknowledges that he'll always be considered a "Come From Away," he's grateful for the ability to make a life—and a living—on the rugged island. "I'm not sure building the cottages earned me my stripes, but it's certainly allowed me to have a deeper relationship with this magical place and the great people who live here," he says. "Marrying a Cape Bretoner didn't hurt, either!"

Ontario-born writer and editor Beth Hitchcock lives in Nova Scotia. She wrote "Some Colour from Down Under" in our August '23 issue.



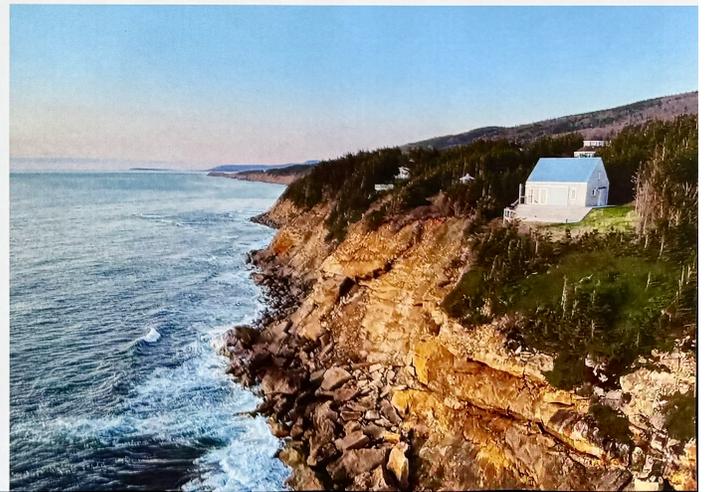
◀ When naming TwoBySea (left), Stewart took inspiration from the poem "Paul Revere's Ride," published in 1861. "One if by land, and two if by sea," writes the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

◀ In 1996, Stewart and Bell got married in a field by SeaSky (right), the first of the six cottages. The couple lived there for a few years until they moved into a larger home on the property.

▼ TumbleSea (below), and the rest of the cottages, sit on a 150-acre plot that Stewart bought in two parcels. "When I bought the second parcel, I actually reunited the land. It had been severed, and I brought it back together," he says.



Over the bed in TwoBySea (above) is a sculptural curiosity that Bell spotted at a nearby salvage shop: a seven-foot-long whale rib. "When Bell called to tell me about it, I said, 'Holy shit, buy that!'" Stewart says.



*"six magical cottages"*

*"SeaSky cottages offer more than just panoramic views;...coastal-chic interiors and the sea and sky that stretches for miles.."*

*"Stewart wanted each of the cottages to feel distinctly Maritime, inside and out."*

*"In every space are books, art and quirky accents."*

*"vistas of the Gulf of St. Lawrence abound"*

*"...unique in essence"*