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The Fabric of Good Design

A Riviera residence by Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar

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Facing page: Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar regards interior design as a marriage of aesthetics and practicality

This page: Pierre Frey's Arty linen fabric by Marie-Cécile Aptel swathes the George Smith sofa, armchair and pouf in captivating brushstrokes, while the Ralph Lauren® Home floor light adds angular verve

PAINTERLY CHARM

An idyllic Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat property designed by **Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar** *blends colour with calm to make the most of its exclusive, sun-drenched Riviera setting*

Words by EMILY BAXTER-PRIEST
Photography by ASHRAF GHANNAM and ANTHONY LANNERETONNE

Playful patterns pop in the child's bedroom with the Pierre Frey Les Bidules cotton print designed by artist Gaël Davrinche on the blinds and bed frame, alongside D. Porthault bedding and bunny

Clean lines shine in the primary bedroom with an upholstered headboard by The Headboard Workshop in custom Georgia Macmillan Double Inky Stripe fabric, Olatz's Aswan bedding and bedside tables by Miles Redd for The Lacquer Company

Often named the most expensive place for real estate in the world, Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat embodies elegance and exclusivity. Reserved for society's elite, the peninsula has tempted many illustrious residents to its Riviera shores, from Charlotte Béatrice de Rothschild and Charlie Chaplin to Jean Cocteau. The Rolling Stones even recorded their classic 1972 album *Exile on Main St.* while staying at Villa Nellcôte. Since then, renowned architects and decorators have made their mark, with Oscar Niemeyer designing Villa Nara Mondadori which was later decorated by Peter Marino, Norman Foster building the extraordinary La Voile, Billy Baldwin decorating the iconic La Fiorentina, and just recently Jacques Grange reviving Villa Santo Sospir.

Today, creativity is still very much in the air, as exemplified by this house designed by Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar – a white-washed property spliced with bold specks of colour. "I have lived in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat for the past 15 years," says Maria, "and that helps greatly with the design, because you get to work truly knowing the foundation from the inside out – the climate, the movement of the sun throughout the year, the quality of the tap water... These are all vital factors that not only determine the choice of materials but define the durability and appearance throughout time". By this she means adding heated floors for the winter months, and central AC with HEPA filters to help with the seasonal pollination of the surrounding Aleppo pines to ensure the upholstered pieces don't get damaged. Every minute detail is taken into consideration.

Maria views interior design as part science and part art, and believes practicality is a cornerstone of good design. "At the end of the day, your house must not only look good, it must work for you," she advises. "It must cater to a comfortable, pleasant life and it must be durable. Everything always looks great when it has just been installed, but how will it look in five or ten years, how will it function?"

Based between Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat and Doha, Maria has cultivated an eye for design and developed her aesthetic by spending time in the Côte d'Azur. "We are spoiled with gems like Villa Kerylos, which is like a pilgrimage spot for some of the world's top designers. And I've also been very fortunate to have had private access to some of the world's best properties here, since my husband [renowned artist Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar] has exhibited his works in places, such as Villa Nara Mondadori and Villa Santo Sospir, before and after the restoration."

Maria says it's also been fascinating to study the history of all the renowned houses in the area, which is crucial for perspective. "Take Hubert de Givenchy's Le Clos Fiorentina, which in itself is an absolute epitome of perfection. I think his decorating taste is unsurpassed in terms of timelessness, especially at Le Clos and Le Jonchet. Actually, my choice of Olatz's Aswan bedding for the primary bedroom in this property was a nod to an almost identical one at Givenchy's own bedroom at Le Clos, with that narrow blue trim."

Walking through this property, you'll notice a striking balance between crisp simplicity and vibrant, mood-enhancing colours, creating an artistic oxymoron of calmness with a frisson of energy. The interior style is chic, yet warm and welcoming. A place that invites stillness. "The environment is created on a sensual level, made of an array of textures, colours, scents, lighting and ergonomics," explains Maria. "But above all, it's in the details, the execution, the finishing. You can get the most precious marble, but if the installation or cut is not perfect, it's a complete waste of time." The same goes for every material, humble or not, Maria adds, impressing the importance of quality and craftsmanship. "You can choose a modest material but never compromise on the quality of installation."

Striking a balance between the past and present, Maria has designed the property to feel current yet timeless. She emphasises that selecting the right base colour was crucial, opting for Farrow & Ball's All White, which contains no pigments besides white, enhancing its ability to reflect natural light beautifully. Applied to the walls, ceiling, solid oak floorboards, skirtings and more, the consistency of colour paired with a variety of finishings has created "a beautiful base, much like a perfect white shirt that works with absolutely anything", explains Maria.

To maintain that ambience, she settled on Devon&Devon's Simply Plain ceramic wallcovering with matching ceramic dado railing and skirting, complemented by Bisazza's offset white mosaics for the floors of all the bathrooms. "I love consistency. I think a thoughtfully composed house should be like a book with chapters, not a collection of random short stories. It creates coherence, order, composure," she says.

So important is the detail, Maria spent months looking for the right pieces. "I can't tell you how much time it took to find the traditional-looking shower drains for this project," she says, eventually finding them at Volevatch. "It was my metal of choice throughout the property, and I wouldn't settle for anything else," she smiles.

To ensure continuity and coherence throughout each room, Maria made sure that the fabrics and trimmings worked together to create a smoothness, easing the transition between spaces. In her selection of fabrics, her background in art is evident, with a dynamic, paint-splattered Pierre Frey linen taking centre stage. "I love this fabric. It's actually based on an artwork by a brilliant French artist, Marie-Cécile Aptel, who was one of the artists at my Monaco art gallery. I love how this laid-back linen works so well with George Smith's rolled arm sofa, which we had custom-built as a four-seater to suit the space, with matching armchairs." Maria even had the ➤

Above: A mood board featuring samples of selections

Crisp aesthetics abound in the primary bathroom with Devon&Devon's ceramic wallcovering, Bisazza's offset white mosaics on the floor, faucets by Barber Wilsons, sanitaryware by The Water Monopoly and accessories and wall lights by Lefroy Brooks

The French Riviera is fringed by the azure waters of the Mediterranean and is widely hailed as a holiday haven

Sculptural table by India Mahdavi is flanked by Jean-Michel Frank designed Ecart International rattan chairs and hand-woven abaca rug creating a mood that is sophisticated and laid-back

legs upholstered in the same fabric resulting in a very contemporary look on very classic pieces of furniture.

Another Pierre Frey fabric – which was created for the maison by French artist, Gaël Davrinche – also finds its way onto the upholstered pieces and window treatments in the child's bedroom, adding a playful, colourful whimsy to an otherwise calming space. "I've been wanting to try this fabric out for a while, and it felt like the perfect fit here," Maria explains.

The wardrobe is lined in the matching wallpaper, echoed with the beautiful custom Georgia MacMillan Inky Stripe fabric in the primary bedroom, "as a nice little old-world touch", says Maria.

Other whispers of charm can be found in the nickelled Ralph Lauren Home lighting fixtures, scalloped rattan furniture and basketware pieces for the child's bedroom, or elegant Armac Martin latches on painted tongue and grove-lined deVOL cabinetry. Each piece showcases the many facets of Maria's classic taste applied with attention to detail, mastery and well-honed expertise.

From the French Riviera to the Middle East, Maria continues to cast her imaginative eye over the worlds of design and interiors, crafting visual feasts in celebration of culture and colour. Maria's upcoming projects include working on a special line of lifestyle objects with craftsmen in France and heading a commercial project in Doha's Msheireb Downtown, the latter of which she says feels like returning home. "Yes, it feels, in some ways, like homecoming, as I was raised in Dubai as a child, so the Middle East has always been a part of me and my life." ■

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Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar

Artworks by Reza Derakshani and Farideh Lashai make a statement in the airy living room