

BAJA

L I F E S T Y L E



Photography by Doug Gould/Baja Realty Photo

Dreaming in Color

TALAVERA TALES AT CASA DE LOS SUEÑOS

Talavera de la Reina, a village in Spain, has long been influential in the world of fine ceramics. When Spanish monks introduced their stylized pottery to the indigenous people in their new colonies in Mexico, the local artisans blended these new techniques with their established practices to create the famous talavera pottery of Mexico.

The monks' intent was to decorate their monastery and church with the talavera tiles and religious sculptures. Little did they know that their efforts would, centuries later, inspire a California homeowner to change her life.

Kristi Black stands in the shower of an upstairs bathroom in her Baja home, eyes closed and her palms firmly pressed against the ornate tiles that decorate the room. "The tiles are alive to me," she says. "They feed me spiritually and nourish my need to be creative. When I finish a project, I have my own little, personal ceremony to appreciate the tiles and to thank the artisans whose hard work enables me to create these elaborate spaces."

It all began when Kristi decided to retila a bathroom in her Costa Mesa home in 2001. A friend mentioned that if she wanted to use the Mexican talavera tiles that she she so loved, she ought to go to Mexico to buy them.

So Kristi and husband Ian reserved a vacation rental just south of Rosarito Beach and set off to find her tiles. But they found more. They found a new life! Enchanted by Baja, six months later they bought the house directly behind the one they had rented. It had been a rental and needed some work, but it had "good bones" and Kristi saw it as a blank canvas for her creativity ... and more tile projects!





The home that came to be named *Casa de los Sueños* took on a life of its own. After much renovation, Kristi and Ian brought in Roberto Moreno, who had designed the home originally. They added another level, incorporating another palapa-style roofline like the original one downstairs, maintaining the integrity of the home throughout. With a background in the film and photo industries, Kristi is an artist at heart with an undeniable eye for detail.

To be a guest at *Casa de los Sueños* is to indulge in Ian's Scottish/English hospitality, because before you have been there more than a few minutes you will be handed an exotic drink of your choice, your glass adorned with a multitude of colorful flowers. The flowers are fresh from the *Garden of Ian*, an intriguing and impressive accomplishment since the house has no yard to speak of. But every available inch of deck, balcony and patio is filled with potted, blooming flowers and climbing vines. The resident hummingbirds barely notice our presence as they dart from bloom to bloom.

Warmed by rich wood, earthy brick, colorful and varied textiles, the downstairs living room looks out past Ian's flowers, over red

tiled roofs to the ocean beyond. Kristi's tile mural over the fireplace exhibits a traditional John the Baptist scene, the subjects bearing a striking resemblance to the Conquistadors that ruled at the time the talavera art was nurtured in Mexico.

Displayed in the cabinet of one downstairs bedroom is a collection of talavera-style jars and vases that Krisi has collected in the years since she started creating with tiles. In the adjacent bathroom the counters, sinks, and tubs are, naturally, tiled in the talavera style. Colorful tiles also adorn the faces of the steps leading to the upstairs. But wait! There are some sort of footprints there! Big bird tracks! While handpicking these glazed terra cotta tiles, Kristi found that a number of them had been trod on by turkeys while they were drying in the sun. She decided they would add charm and character to the stairwell climb. And they do!

A large wooden Don Quixote greets guests at the second floor entry. The large room with its inviting canopy bed is part of Kristi and Ian's hideaway and is self-contained for when they rent out the downstairs of *Casa de los Sueños* to vacationers. The adjacent bath-



room is an underwater fantasy! A giant red lobster stands guard on the door and inside, you are submerged into a colorful ocean world. A mural of palms and marine life adorns the walls while fish swim and crustaceans crawl from every corner.

Light pours from skylights and windows into the tiny stairway that leads to the top floor of *Casa de los Sueños*. At the top is an exotic ocean view sanctuary laden with rich colors and textures. It is the home's crowing glory. Tall, carved columns hug the sides of the corner fireplace. They are colorfully painted and topped with metal flames, also painted and backlit. Tropical birds are perched above the heavy wooden mantle. Hues of cranberry and pomegranate warm the room. The sun soaks in to warm the colors even more.

Wishing to get a closer look at the ocean before we depart, we hitch a ride in *Sangría*, the couple's golf cart surrey ... yes, with fringe on the top. We wind our way down as the waves crash onto the beach below and a lone surfer catches one last wave. The sun sinks low, adding a beautiful golden glow to Kristi and Ian's special world in Baja.



To me, designing with Mexican tile is like having all of your favorite family and friends over for a fiesta! Sometimes they seem to congregate in the *cocina*, sometimes by the courtyard fountain, and sometimes around the fireplace. Fortunately, I have been blessed with a knack for crowd control. I sort them out and give them all a job! When my project is complete, they are happily enjoying themselves in their new home welcoming everyone with colorful smiles.

Baja boosts my creativity! I am surrounded by a continuous mix of charming hand-made tiles containing their own energetic *espíritu*. The tiles feel alive with the spirits of those who crushed the clay, gave form to the earth, baked them in the oven and them dressed them up in their prettiest colors.

My passion for tile has connected me to some of the best people and projects imaginable. There is nothing more fun and rewarding than getting together and co-creating tile magic with another kindred spirit! Who says margaritas and work don't mix? They do in Baja!

Kristi Black