

BEACH DREAMS

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR MARY KAY ANDREWS PENS A HAPPY ENDING FOR A FIXER-UPPER COTTAGE ON THE GEORGIA COAST.



Mary Kay Andrews is the author of seven novels—including her latest, *The Fixer Upper*—and a lifelong flea market junkie. She lives in Atlanta but escapes to Tybee Island, Georgia, to relax and write.

My husband, Tom, and I had dreamed of having a beach house for years, since leaving our hometown on Florida's Gulf Coast three decades ago. But we put it on hold as we built our careers and raised and educated our two children. As time went on, though, our dream took shape. We didn't need anything grand, just a cozy little cottage for gathering friends and family.

Eventually, our search narrowed to Tybee Island, on Georgia's coast. Why Tybee? For one thing, we had a history with the place. We'd moved to nearby Savannah as 22-year-old newlyweds, and then again after my husband graduated from engineering school. Our daughter, Katie, was born in Savannah, and somewhere I have a snapshot of her dozing in her infant seat, under the shade of a lounge chair on the beach at Tybee. I'd even set one of my novels, *Savannah Breeze*, on Tybee. And then there's location. We can sling a suitcase and some fishing rods into our car in Atlanta and be crossing over the hump-backed Lazaretto Creek Bridge in four hours. Ten minutes later, after a stop for Georgia-caught brown shrimp at Bowie's Seafood, or steaks at The Tybee Market, we can have the fixings for dinner. On Fridays, if we sneak away from Atlanta early enough, Tom can make it out on his boat before dark, casting for redfish, flounder, and sea trout in the tidal creeks and ocean sounds. But there's more to it than that. Tybee is a '50s throwback, a frankly funky, deliberately dowdy beach town of infinite charm, at least to us. There is no place on Tybee you can't easily reach on foot or by bike, no restaurant demanding attire more formal than flip-flops and a clean pair of shorts. It's a place to "chillax," as our son would say.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: A junk-shop catch hangs in the living room. A vintage typewriter on Mary Kay's desk. The Atlantic is just a short stroll away. Fresh-caught blue crab. New paint juices up an old hall tree. Fishing gear awaits eager anglers. Dolphins frolic in nearby Turner Creek. Mary Kay's bright book jackets match her decor. Son Andy and nephew Zack Trocheck tote drinks.

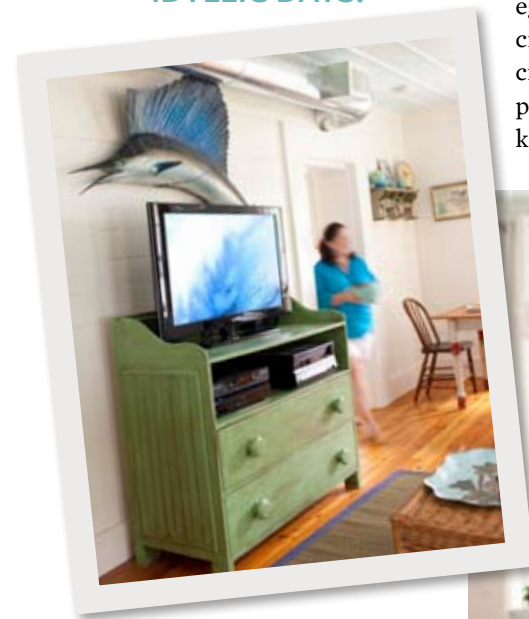


BERRIES

NER



WHEN WE HIT THE BRIDGE OVER LAZZETTO CREEK, WE ROLL DOWN THE WINDOWS, INHALE THE SALT AIR, AND ALLOW OURSELVES A MOMENT OF BLISS. IT'S TYBEE TIME AGAIN, AT LEAST FOR A FEW IDYLIC DAYS.



Opposite: A heart pine dining table and mismatched chairs seat the crowd that gathers for beach weekends. Mary Kay's husband, Tom, inset, is the family seafood chef. Top: A mint-green paint job, picket fence, and hot-pink door take the 1940s cottage back to its glory. Above: Daughter Katie Abel whisks in snacks from the kitchen. Right: Years of collecting cast-off furniture and vintage accessories gave Mary Kay the "funky junky retro coastal vibe" she wanted.



It became clear pretty quickly that our budget would demand a fixer-upper. We had made offers on four houses before, and each time the sellers laughed. Finally, the real estate agent suggested I look at a house that had just come on the market. Painted a hideous egg-yolk yellow with circus-blue trim, it was a concrete block box, circa 1943, sitting in a weed-filled yard. The inside was no better—crumbling linoleum tile floors, block walls covered with Con-Tac paper or cheap paneling. The bathrooms were health hazards, the kitchen deplorable. The screen porch was lined with discarded





IT'S THE BAREFOOT LIFE FOR US: WORN WOOD FLOORS, COTTON RUGS, WHITE CURTAINS. NOTHING SHINY OR NEW WILL DO AT THE BEACH.



refrigerators. An inspection revealed that virtually everything in the house except the original board-and-batten ceilings and the indestructible concrete walls would need replacing.

Despite the problems, we were smitten. And by we, I mean me. My practical husband was dubious. But when the owners accepted our lowball offer, it was time to pay up or shut up. For my birthday, I asked for a Dumpster and a crowbar, and the family—Katie, her husband, Mark, and our son, Andy—had our own demolition derby.

We knew from the start that we'd offer the Breeze Inn, as we decided to name the house, for rent when we weren't using it. So during the renovation we added what we knew would make it appealing to vacationing families: three full baths, an outdoor shower, and low-maintenance fabrics and furniture.

Above: Son Andy's bedroom is the landing spot for vintage nautical finds.

Top: Niece-in-law Corry Trocheck introduces son Blaine to the ocean.

Middle: Powder blue paneling shows off built-in storage cubbies and a claw-foot tub.

Bottom: Comfy pillows in shades of ocean blue make a dreamy bed.

Opposite: Jackets from Mary Kay's novels hang over her desk.



We spent the next nine months bringing the house back to life, with my husband's builder brother Bob acting as general contractor. Our vision was the pastel-color Florida beach cottages of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. That Christmas, I requested palm trees for the front yard. I got them, plus the news that Katie and Mark would make us grandparents by July! Over the winter, between working on my novel-in-progress, *The Fixer Upper*, I hunted down period-appropriate fixtures. A claw-foot bathtub would be ideal for grandchildren and rubber duckies. The vintage cast-iron kitchen sink could hold a bushel of boiled blue crabs. And the hot-pink screen door with aluminum heron silhouette—lugged all the way from the Brimfield antiques market in Massachusetts—was the perfect welcoming touch.

OUR BEACH HOUSE HAS TAUGHT TOM AND ME A BIG LESSON: SOMETIMES DELAYED GRATIFICATION MAKES FOR THE SWEETEST DREAMS OF ALL.

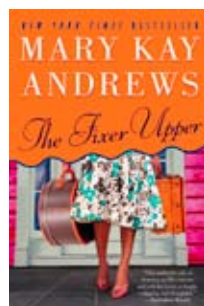
To furnish the house I turned to our basement, where I'd been hoarding decor for "our future beach house" for years. Vintage rattan, antique wicker, retro '50s lamps, bark-cloth drapes, chenille bedspreads—all of it scooped up from estate sales, eBay,

Craigslist and junk shops—were trucked down to Tybee.

Even before the house was officially finished, family started to congregate. St. Patrick's Day brought a dozen of Andy's college-age friends for a cornhole tournament in the front yard. Come Easter morning, we walked to Mass at the tiny Catholic church built by local fishermen and boat-builders, then we invited island friends to join us for lunch on the porch and Tom's special roast lamb.

Now that we've been here a year, we've slipped into the rhythm of Tybee life. We sip early morning coffee in the yard, greeting neighbors walking their dogs on our quiet street. We pedal over to the market on the "beer bike" (so named because it has saddle bags big enough to hold several sacks of groceries and a case of Bud Light). Midmorning, we stroll the three blocks to the beach, pulling a wagon loaded with coolers and chairs. We take naps in early afternoon, the porch glider's rhythmic squeak providing the perfect lullaby for sleepy babies and drowsy grown-ups. Nightlife might mean shagging to beach tunes at Doc's Bar, or more usually, dinner starring seasonal seafood and steaks, followed by cocktails on the porch. Or sometimes I sneak down to Tybee solo, prop myself up in bed with my laptop, and tap away at my next book, free from the distractions of my full-time home.

After only 30 years of waiting for it, our beach house has taught Tom and me a big lesson: Sometimes delayed gratification makes for the sweetest dreams of all. ♪



Mary Kay Andrews' latest novel, *The Fixer Upper*, comes out in paperback this month from HarperCollins. "It's about one woman's quest to redo an old house, and her life," she says. Mary Kay's other best-selling novels—including *Deep Dish*, *Blue Christmas*, and *Savannah Blues*—follow the adventures of more sassy Southern women. Keep up with the author's comings and goings, and sign up for her newsletter, at marykayandrews.com.