

A fashionable life

Liza Bruce

OUR FAVOURITE SWIMWEAR DESIGNER SHOWS RACHEL SHARP HER MOROCCAN BOLTHOLE

They may say first impressions last a lifetime, but swimwear designer Liza Bruce probably thanks her lucky stars that there are exceptions, because the first time she laid eyes on her now-stunning house in rural Morocco, it stole her breath for all the wrong reasons.

"Oh god, it was so ugly, hideously ugly," she recalls, laughing. "Although it was built in the '70s, it was horribly designed and unfinished. But that was kind of the draw, ironically, because sometimes things can be so wrong, [they] become a challenge. Plus it had a certain charm. There was this fantastic overgrown mulberry tree and we [were inspired by] that sense of the house being abandoned and needing a new life."

That was 2004; now, after two years of painstaking planning, renovations and decorating with her husband, artist Nicholas Alvis Vega, Bruce has created a tranquil escape from their London home, a place to inspire their creative work, and a base that keeps her close to the Moroccan textiles and craftspeople that are so central to her designs.

"It's just such an amazing place. We're in this tiny little village by a river in the Ourika Valley, about half an hour's drive outside Marrakesh. We're pretty much the only Westerners in the town," she says, extolling the virtues of living outside the city's expatriate enclaves, despite having many friends who live there.



FRANÇOIS HALARD. STYLED BY SARAJANE HOARE

Bruce and her artist husband created an all-natural pool, disguised as a waterhole.



Bruce sits surrounded by objects collected from Ethiopia and Syria in one of the bedrooms.



The pool's seating area, adorned with West African elephant masks, beaded skirts and crowns.

Life has always had fairytale tendencies — and a travel bent — for Bruce and her husband of more than 30 years. In a *Romeo and Juliet*-style plot, the couple met when at school in London when she was just 14 and he was 17. She had grown up in New York, he in Nairobi. Their teen romance was cut short when Liza's father took her to live with him in Mexico, but the forced separation didn't last — just a few months later, a smitten Nicholas followed. And so began decades of adventure and travel, during which Bruce would emerge as one of the most influential swimwear designers of all time (she is widely credited as the first to harness the powers of Lycra for beachwear), and Vega became a celebrated artist.

Today, the couple, who have no children and travel between London, Morocco and their third home in Jaipur, India, are famously one of the most devoted in the fashion business.

For their home, it would have been easy to cross the line from authentic interior design to clichéd overkill ("because you do see these repetitions of the copper ►



The kitchen has a tree growing through it, giving new meaning to the idea of bringing the outdoors in.



Overlooking the pool are relaxed, semi-private seating areas.



African objects are scattered throughout the house, evidence of a life well travelled.



The house is full of colour, thanks to the vegetable-dye paints the couple chose for the walls.



Bruce's husband designed the opulent chair and light shades.

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sphinx, hideous cushions and the lanterns everywhere"), but their 12-room house is a perfect example of minimalist Moroccan. "We've always been fascinated by [Islamic] architecture because it's very modern, but also classical and balanced and clean," says Bruce. The pair, working from books on Islamic design they'd been collecting for 30 years, spent two years modernising their riad without losing its authentic charm (no plastic power points here), basing their colour scheme on authentic soft purple and teal vegetable-dye hues. "Initially, we thought it was going to be all white, but ... [that was] kind of too easy, too obvious. So it evolved," says Bruce. "I think people are very afraid of colour and doing something daring."

While much of their wooden furniture came from Africa, almost all the finishes — from ironwork to lamps, floors, brass inlays and cut-glass doors — were designed by Vega and made by local craftsmen. "All the fabulous textiles you can see, Nicholas did all of that. But we brought the fantastic gold chairs [also Vega's handiwork] from London. They're about 20 years old," Bruce explains, adding that they've been careful not to make the home too grand. "It is luxurious because there are a lot of textiles, but it's not sumptuous in a material way. We didn't want to come in with all these mod cons and say, 'Hey, we're from the West and we've got all this stuff'. I mean, it's pretty primitive." But the pièce de résistance — their all-natural swimming pool — does make

FRANÇOIS HALARD. STYLED BY SARA-JANE HOARE

the most of modern technology, despite being disguised as a waterhole. "There's no chlorine in it — it's fantastic. They had to haul all of these huge rocks into the pool and then they filled it with sand and papyrus. We heated it, but we never turn the heat on ... it's just naturally chilly, but brilliant. It's like a billabong. And there are lots of birds; they swoop in at 6am and there's a cacophony of amazing sounds." It's little wonder that Bruce confesses to living in little more than a swimsuit and caftan here.

The couple may be based away from the buzz of Marrakesh, but with a village full of families surrounding them, and the local produce markets nearby, life is far from boring. "We swim every day, we sunbathe, we read, we design. We love cooking, especially here because everything's fresh and in season." They're not short of a few European indulgences either. "We have pancakes made for us every morning," she says, courtesy of the "wonderful" local family who remained living in the house after Bruce and Vega bought it, helping to cook, garden and keep it secure while they are away.

"And we do do a certain amount of socialising here, which we don't tend to do much in London," Bruce adds of their free-spirited travelling/working lifestyle. "We don't really have a schedule, which drives our friends mad. So we never set dates for anything, and we kind of dash around. But that's part of the fun." ■

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