

# SURF & SAFARI

*A storied sportsmen's club on the Vineyard is re-imagined to provide adventure for a new generation.*

By Chris White  
Photography by Jeremy Bittermann



Around the turn of the 20th century, hunting or “gunning” clubs gained popularity amongst the titans of the gilded age, industrialists who had amassed fortunes that demanded new hobbies, lifestyles, repositories for their wealth. In many ways, these clubs tied in with the popularity of President Theodore Roosevelt, whose wide appeal drew in part upon his reputation as a frontiersman and a big game hunter, but these organizations also shared his naturalist and conservationist values. The oldest federal conservation agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was established in 1871, which coincided with a philosophical change amongst hunters and fisherman that would develop into a partnership between “sporting” and conserving the land and wildlife for future generations. Hunt clubs sprang up in the Adirondacks, around Boston in towns like Wenham, and they also took root on the Cape and Islands. On Martha’s Vineyard, from 1903 to about 1920, a handful of such hunting and gunning clubs acquired so much combined property that they occupied nearly every acre of land on the south coast of the island between Oyster Pond to the east and Tisbury Great Pond to the west.

While visitors hunted a variety of game, the clubs’ proximity to both the Atlantic and the island’s great ponds led to their particular renown as destinations for hunting waterfowl. According the Vineyard Gazette, the clubs

functioned as “cherished refuges for their members, not only for the gunning but also for the beauty and bracing nature of the whole terrain among the ponds and along the ocean beaches.” The clubs also developed rivalries amongst each other, and members of the organizations delighted in playing pranks, even “blowing cigar smoke across property lines to scare away the ducks.” The heyday of the clubs crested in the 1920s, but the majority of the land has remained essentially undeveloped ever since. As some of the more enthusiastic club members reached old age, and the organizations declined in popularity, private owners bought and preserved much of the land for themselves, but over 600 acres were donated to the Long Point Wildlife Refuge, now owned and managed by The Trustees of Reservations.

Even today, the entirety of the area formerly occupied by the clubs remains incredibly sparsely populated. It was precisely for the communion with nature and the gifts of seclusion that one family decided to purchase land upon which the buildings of a former club once stood, and their subsequent transformation of the site is both stunningly modern and absolutely in keeping with the historical foundations upon which the new home has been built. With the help of Maryann Thompson Architects and Bannon Custom Builders, the owners have created an oasis steeped in nature.

In some ways, the philosophy driving the hunting clubs was in keeping with the very roots of



Architect Maryann Thompson designed the home to appear as though it had evolved naturally from the surrounding environment.

the land itself. For thousands of years, the forests and lands on and around the Vineyard’s south shore were home to Wampanoag People, who established settlements and farms that made use of the area’s natural resources. Ecologist Lloyd Raleigh explains the area’s history in an article for The Trustees of Reservations, published in 2000; he notes that even today, the Long Point Wildlife Refuge continues to employ a number of methods of Native land stewardship in their current “habitat management practices: prescribed burning, girdling, and clearing, for example.” Soon after British colonists arrived, Thomas Mayhew “purchased” all of Martha’s Vineyard in 1641 from two separate charter holders: Sir Fernando Gorges and William Alexander, Earl of Scotland. Thirty-two years later, Simon Athearn, a former servant boy, bought much of what is today known as Tisbury and West Tisbury, but he did so without





Natural elements throughout the home blur the lines between the comfort found inside and the unbridled natural world outside.

approval from Mayhew. This led to bitter land disputes, but Athearn would eventually prevail, and the land passed to his descendents, who established farms throughout the area. At one point, Simon Athearn “grazed 302 sheep, 12 cows, two pair of oxen, six steers, two heifers, a bull, eight yearlings, six swine, and one mare,” according probate court records from Dukes County Courthouse.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Raleigh states, members of the Athearn family continued to own much of the land along the south shore. While the world around them had moved on to whaling, and later into the Industrial Revolution, the Athearns continued farming, hunting, and gathering from the sea. They set eel traps along the shoreline, dug and tonged for shellfish, installed a seine for herring, and they fished

for blues and striped bass. They also provided shacks along the beach to shelter shipwrecked sailors. By the turn of the 20th century, however, the financial successes of wealthy industrialists had begun to change the landscape of the Cape and the Islands as titans scooped up large tracts of property. It was during this time that the Athearns and a handful of other area families sold their lands to the hunting clubs.

In an effort to preserve the privacy of the new owners at the site of this particular former club, let’s give the location a generic, fictional name: the Surf Club. It’s worth noting that the name arises from a multi-sensory immersion; the soundtrack of the Surf Club is the rhythmic crashing of the Atlantic’s waves, its natural air freshener is the scent

of the ocean’s spray, and the views from every bedroom in both the main home and the guest house, directly access the sea. That said, the houses are set much farther back from the shoreline than at a typical surf club, and in fact, they are both set father back than the original hunting club buildings. Jarrod Bannon, project manager at Bannon Custom Builders, explains that projections for climate change show that “in 85 years, the water will actually be up to where the guest house is now.” Given this logic, the main house would survive at least for awhile longer, even after the smaller building slips into the sea.

In the Surf Club’s construction process, Bannon tore down the existing gunning club structures and situated the guest house

where a summer shack had stood. “There was nothing where the main house stands now; where the lawn is today, that was all forested,” he says. In keeping with the company’s philosophy, both houses are uniquely “custom built,” and Bannon states, “There isn’t a single piece of wood of the same length—anywhere in the house.” The two structures share the same design aesthetic, and both feature “winged” butterfly roofs, natural wood and stone exteriors, and walls comprised mostly of glass. “It was an extremely complicated build,” says Bannon, with obvious pride in his team. “For one thing, the triple-glazed windows came from Europe—with a five month lead time.” Due to the intricate design, it was necessary to build the structure first, then measure for the windows. Bannon says that the usual practice is to erect the frame, then order windows almost immediately. For the Surf Club, however, he says, “We actually built temporary windows out of plastic to keep everything weather tight while we waited on the glass from Europe. This out-of-the-box approach allowed us to finish the job in about a year and a half rather than two years.” The family was able to move into their new home in 2017.

If ever there was an architect to design what the owners hoped to achieve at the Surf Club, that person is Maryann Thompson. The guest house and main home stand together in this forest clearing above the ocean and ponds like two siblings, twin-like in the way of Russian dolls, as though the smaller one could nest in the older

one's wings. The dramatic butterfly roofs create the illusion of floating in the air, while the wooden and stone exterior keeps the structures rooted in the local ecosystem. The buildings absolutely capture the essence of the naturalist aspect of the old clubs, and indeed of the land's original inhabitants. From a distance or from the perspective of an osprey's eye, the two houses look like a sight one might encounter on a luxurious safari, like at the Aman-i-Khas, in Rajasthan, India, where guests pay small fortunes to spot some of the last remaining tigers in the wild. As Thompson puts it, "They're like big tents."

While the houses may behave like tents, the sheer volume of glass and the complexity of the design make Thompson's statement seem radically humble and understated, and there's a high tech machine-like functionality to the Surf Club houses. "The owners are really into the environment and the outdoors," says Thompson, "and I'm constantly trying to make beautiful houses but keep them sustainable." In fact, Maryann Thompson Architects is renowned for its commitment to sustainable design; the firm has won numerous awards for green architecture and for sustainability. "One thing I think is really cool," she says, with no hint of intended pun, "is that there's no air conditioning in the houses." Instead, some of the tent-like design features serve as climate control mechanisms. The giant overhangs of the roofs, big windows and sliding doors that open completely, clerestory windows, and Haiku fans combine forces to create a stack effect throughout

the house. "It's the same reason that barns in New England have cupolas," Thompson explains. "As the hot air rises, it draws cold air up from the ground, creating a cooling breeze throughout the home."

The building materials in the Surf Club further emphasize a commitment to the natural landscape. All of the color comes from the wood and stones themselves: red cedar trim on the exterior and a light palette of white oak and maple on the floors, stairs, and casework. The soffits and ceilings are yellow cedar, and Vermont ledge makes up the stonework of the fireplaces and ornamentation of the base of the houses. Glass, the triple-glazed variety imported from Europe, makes up most of the wall space. Thompson explains this technology is so energy efficient that it behaves like "actual" walls in terms of its insulating qualities. "Even though the houses are very modern," she says, "we've used very vernacular techniques to reduce fossil fuel consumption." There are solar panels on the garage roof, and Bannon states, "The owners are considering going completely off the grid in the future." In doing so, they would complete a return to the island clubs' roots in nature. The owners, along with the sculptural craftsmanship and artistry of Bannon and Thompson, have created a retreat worthy of hosting not only President Roosevelt, but also a refuge that Henry Thoreau or John James Audubon would be proud to call home.

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