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STYLE

Backyard Bedouins

Inside Wayne and Patti Eastep's Kazakhstani yurt.

By Pam Daniel

PHOTOGRAPHER WAYNE EASTEP learned to fit in anywhere while traveling the globe for clients such as *National Geographic*, Nikon and Mobil Oil; but there's nowhere he feels more at home than in the yurt in the back yard of his Sarasota residence.

After earning a master's in divinity, Eastep considered a career as a professor. "But I decided I would rather experience the world than teach about it," he says. Reflective and curious, he loved photographing other cultures but felt especially drawn to a nomadic Bedouin tribe called Al Murrah.

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The couple inside their yurt, which is furnished with bright, authentic tapestries and blankets; a wolf pelt hangs behind them.

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“Their way of life and unbroken bloodline go back 5,000 years,” he says. “I knew there was something I could learn from them.” In 1982, he took advantage of a stint as the official photographer for the diplomatic headquarters of Saudi Arabia to meet the tribe’s head sheik and ask to document their lifestyle.

After a series of meetings, the sheik consented—on two conditions. “You must live with us and live as we do,” he said. “And you must learn the language.” Wayne and his wife Patti spent three months back at home immersing themselves in the Arabic language, then returned to Saudi Arabia, where for four months, they ate, slept and traveled with the tribe. The two were officially adopted by the Al Murrah, and their lives have been entwined ever since. Eastep has returned more than 30 times, often spending a month at a time with the tribe.

The couple collaborated on a book about the Bedouins, from whom they say they learned life-changing lessons—the importance of family, the power of community, the transcendent unity of the physical, social and spiritual realms. And



The couple hosts dinner parties and other gatherings in the yurt.

those lessons are exemplified in the yurt, which they purchased after watching Kazakh nomads spend a day erecting it. The yurt is furnished with authentic, colorful tapestries and blankets, all made from natural materials and dyes. The pelt of a wolf—a totemic figure in the tribe’s mythology—hangs on a wall. Resting on the earth and opening to the sky, it’s rooted in history and spans multiple dimensions.

A group of friends who call themselves “the Yurtsers” helps the Easteps erect it in the fall, and they enjoy it until Florida’s wet, steamy summers force them to take it down. They like to hold dinner par-

ties there, and it has hosted meditation groups, musicians playing Kazakhstan songs for children adopted from Central Asia and recently, 20 chanting Sufis.

But most of all, the Easteps treasure escaping from everyday stress by entering the quiet space. “It’s astonishing how peaceful and grounded you feel once you’re in here,” Patti says. But the design, with its ventilation opening at the top, also nudges them to “keep an eye on the sky,” says Wayne, to ponder “the big questions” and the deep connections between ourselves, our ancestors and the divine.

Offers They Couldn’t Refuse

The price was right for former owners at downtown’s Versailles.

BLINK AND YOU MAY MISS the pint-sized, five-story Versailles condominium building, sandwiched between the Royal St. Andrew and the pencil-thin Echelon that’s now rising on South Gulfstream Avenue across from Sarasota Bay.

But the little building brought big profits to its former owners after Seaward Development partners Patrick DiPinto III and David Hargreaves in December finished the nearly three-



The Versailles, at left

year process of buying out all 14 owners. Their plan: a 25-unit, 18-story luxury condo tower still to be named. While they work

toward groundbreaking in the summer or fall of 2018, they’re renting out the units.

“What makes this parcel unique is that we have 100 feet of direct waterfront,” says DiPinto. “Many of our neighbors have significantly less. Most of the rooms in our new residences will have big direct water views of Sarasota Bay, Siesta Key, the Gulf of Mexico. The view is one of a kind.”

The location and views persuaded the developers to make offers the owners couldn’t refuse.

Wedding planner Bobbie Hicks bought her 1,629-square-foot, two-bedroom Versailles condo in 1994 for \$120,000. She sold it to Seaward Development for \$1,044,700. Located on the top floor, it brought a premium. A first-floor unit, in contrast, which sold for \$210,000 in 2011 was bought for \$725,000.

Although the price was irresistible, Hicks admits to mixed feelings about the deal. “I really wanted to be there forever,” Hicks says. “I loved my place; I was as happy as could be. It’s kind of heartbreaking.”

While she tries to console herself with her nearly tenfold profit, others are hoping to move in. DiPinto says word of mouth has brought “dozens and dozens of realtors to us with clients that wish to purchase units.” He anticipates floorplans of 3,750 to 5,000 square feet, offered at an average of \$1,100 per square foot.—ILENE DENTON