Broad in the Beam

Beginning life as a sailor’s ‘half-house’ in 1790, this waterside property on Long Island has gradually swelled to a ‘mini-estate’, complete with an acre of land. Its two-man crew – owners Steven Gambrel and Chris Connor – clearly know the ropes, using illustrations of yachts, wrought-iron lanterns and wood panelling to enhance its maritime character. Annie Kelly likes the cut of its jib. Photography: Tim Street-Porter

Containing mostly 19th-century Dutch and French ebonised furniture, this small sitting room represents one of the oldest parts of the house. The ottoman is covered with Bergamo purple horsehair.
however, he concentrated more on textured surfaces and the reflective quality of glass. The house seamlessly incorporates layers of Gambrel's collections, found all over the world on his travels, and which he links into a maritime theme, using objects with nautical references, as well as pewter and glass.

You enter the main house almost directly from the street. Here, Gambrel put one of his favourite pieces of furniture: a Danish Baroque chest of drawers found in Belgium, topped with a collection of tobacco boxes in various types of stone. The eye is led directly through an enfilade of rooms to a glimpse of water past a broad green lawn. To the left of the entry, one of the oldest rooms in the house has been given a bracing dose of purple, and with a sure hand, the designer has combined old and new furniture with meticulous attention to shape and colour. A modern sofa upholstered in purple linen, sitting below an abstract sailing picture, works perfectly with the period furniture in this panelled room. Beyond the spacious pastel-coloured dining room, hung with impressively large brass chandeliers from the Netherlands, Gambrrel added a large kitchen with a view of the cove, using new and recycled materials: the marble floor was rescued from a renovation of Moma, New York.

The spacious living room leading from the kitchen was once the garage. "Stephen and his father shuckered the room in three days," explains Connors, "and the 18th-century beams in the ceiling are old floor joints discovered in Connecticut." Hanging above the reclaimed fireplace is a zodiac table, once used every day by a fortune-teller in Long Beach, California. They installed large "12 over 12" windows along the side that faces the sea, using standard Brocso windows, taking out the aluminium sides and replacing the hanging mechanism with a more traditional chain.

Upstairs, Gambrel added an extra wing of bedrooms for visiting friends, which blends well with the rest of the house. The master bedroom has a commanding view of the water, and a large painting by contemporary New York artist Matthew Benedict acts as a headboard. Out in the garden, the designer built a Westchester-granite barn, based on the proportions of a silversmith store in nearby Southampton. They use this space for summer lunches, and for storing boating equipment in large bins along the side.

"We had to add elements rather than restore the house," Gambrel says. But they kept to its historical past. As Sag Harbor was once one of the three main ports on America's East Coast, the sea was a big inspiration. Upstairs, in a pink guestroom, Gambrel hung framed wallpaper fragments of ships' masts and coils of rope on the wall, which they had discovered in Paris. "We were in the Cignanacoit flea market," explains Connors, "and we found a hand-blocked wallpaper screen in bad shape. Right under the horrified dealer's nose we took out scissors and cut out the pieces we liked, saving us the bother of shipping the whole thing."

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Left, from top: a fable still life hangs above a late 18th-century fireplace in an upstairs guest-room (opposite); the guest-house has the best small windows of the cove; in this redesigned bathroom, Gambrel used custom-glazed tiles from Urban Archaeology and Waterworks fittings. Opposite: a Jasper rug, an egg collection and a linen-covered Flemish chair grace this guest-room.
Left, from top: the master bedroom is decorated with framed images of yachts and rope, cut in fragments from a wallpaper screen; the headboard in this guest room is Gambrel's own design; a model lighthouse sits in the main bathroom. Main picture: the four-poster, made for Gambrel's great-great-great-uncle in the 1850s, faces a French camelback sofa.
Sag Harbor has always been a quieter version of its glamorous cousin, the Hamptons. Only a few miles away, across Long Island, it is a well-preserved early 19th-century whaling town that has become a popular summer-house retreat for New Yorkers. Once a British garrison, the town was attacked by colonists in 1777, and the soldiers driven out. In 1813 they tried but failed to retake it. Eventually Sag Harbor grew into an international port, due to its deep water - with ships leaving for places as far away as Fiji - but the town died after the whaling industry peaked in the 1840s.

Decorator Steven Gambrel and his partner, Chris Connor, discovered this picturesque community 13 years ago, when they rented a house here with a friend. 'It was then an old, decrepit town, down on its luck,' explains Gambrel, who is tall and lanky, with a passing resemblance to the actor Jimmy Stewart. They bought one small house, fixed it up (becoming experts in historic preservation in the process), sold it and bought another. This new house was closer to the water, but overlooked an abandoned property. They will never be able to sell this, the estate agent claimed. 'Kids were scared of it,' adds Gambrel. 'We used to look across the street and see the above-ground swimming pool surrounded by brush and small trees that hid the view of the water.' Finally it came on the market, and the couple decided that this ramshackle old house, half-hidden by the foliage, was a jewel worth restoring.

When they saw the historical records, they discovered that it was once a much less tranquil property, as the Long Island Railroad used to thunder past the back door round the edge of the bay. However, in a seemingly arbitrary planning decision, this section of the line was shut down, and the previous owners of the house got a chance to buy the land, which enlarged the property to more than an acre and gave it direct access to the water. Today, the house has an uninterrupted view of Sag Harbor Cove. What makes it so special is that it feels like a mini-estate, unusual in a small town like this, whose charm is based on its rows of small 'half-houses', some dating back to the 18th century. These sailors' cottages were built on compact plots of land, with only one front window and a front door at one side. Gambrel's house, built in 1790, began as a 'half-house', but was gradually enlarged over the years, especially in 1967, when it fell victim to a series of misguided DIY projects. The couple's main focus was to re-work the extensions into a comfortable living space, while restoring its period core. Thanks to Gambrel's University of Virginia architecture degree, he had the design skills to refine the house's clunky additions into well-proportioned spaces.

Connor stationed himself in the guest-house to supervise construction for almost a year. This was not a big sacrifice, as it sits right on the edge of the water, and has the best view of the property. Now that the work is over, he has joined the local historical society, and enjoys showing friends the amazing architectural variety of the town.

In his New York practice, Gambrel is known for using colour in a sophisticated and subtle way. In his own house,