

Outdoor sanctuaries

Going Tiki

By: Maria Sonnenberg

Guests at Janett LaMontagne and Gary Thompson's Merritt Island residence just need step outside to go native, thanks to a perfectly located room with a killer view.

Looking out to the wildlife sanctuary that faces the couple's residence across Syke's Creek, visitors can revel in true island life inside the tiki room created by Island Mike's of Rockledge. Snug in the waterproof, bug-proof and intimate space, life can be sweet indeed.

"We have family and friends from up north, who think staying outside in Florida is the most wonderful thing in the world," says LaMontagne. With a bathroom off the pool, even the teenager in the family can depend on the room for a spot of adolescent privacy.





During the Christmas boat parade, it was standing room only for the privileged vantage point the hut offers. “The boats congregate near the basin, so they’re right in front of the house,” says LaMontagne. “It’s an incredible sight.”

From the beginning of the project, the couple desired the tiki feel with a twist.

“We have seen a lot of tiki bars but wanted something different,” she says. The stars lined up when the couple accidentally found the tiki-intensive store. “We were driving to Rockledge Gardens when we saw Island Mike’s,” says LaMontagne. “We had planned for the room for two years, but we could never find anybody to bring it to fruition. They did a beautiful job for us.”

Although the tropical lifestyle store only opened this past fall, Island Mike’s has already garnered a reputation for their tiki structures.

LaMontagne knew she wanted something unique for the space overlooking the water. With the misguided philosophy of 1960s construction, LaMontagne’s home originally focused on the front of the house, instead of taking advantage of the gorgeous water

views in the back. Wanting to reverse the focal points, LaMontagne and Thompson embarked on a four-year renovation project that culminated with the tiki room.

To complete the tropical fantasy, the 10x10 thatched room features plantation louvered doors that open up onto a tiny white sand beach complete with palm tree. A hanging platform bed, stained a dark mahogany for a Bermuda ambiance, was created by Island Mike’s tikimeister Mike Sciazza as the centerpiece of the opulent hut. A ceiling fan catches the ever-present breezes, negating the need for air-conditioning. Island torches, bougainvilleas and a large Easter Island head complete the effect. “The intention was to build a room completely separate from the house,” says Sciazza.

After carefully scoping out the environs, Sciazza thought outside the box to realize the homeowner’s dream. “After seeing their home and understanding their lifestyle, I took a different approach to this tiki hut,” says Sciazza. “I asked them to let me build them a very different tiki hut. We made it out of square lumber.”

By using 2x6 marine grade trusses, Sciazza created a solid structure that could withstand howling winds. The homeowners

were particularly impressed with the thatched palm frond roof. “The roof is a work of art,” says LaMontagne. “It’s completely waterproof.”

The secret to the roof lies in the palm fronds, explains Gene Ford, Sciazza’s partner at Island Mike’s. “Whenever we’re building a tiki, the customers and their friends will come in with loads of palm fronds, not understanding that we can’t use them,” he says. “Palm fronds have to be nice and pliable. Once they’re cut off, you have only about 48 hours to use them.” A well-constructed palm frond roof will last five to seven years before needing replacement.

The space is also completely unfriendly to insects, since a mesh between the deck boards and the framing, together with mosquito netting on the ceiling and screening on louvered windows, discourages bugs from visiting.

Entering through French doors leading from the pool, guest can opt to open the structure to the outdoors just by flicking the louvered floor-to-ceiling windows.

“They’re made with marine grade pressure treated lumber with stainless steel hardware so they’re indestructible,” says Sciazza.



Although the room has an unusual purpose, LaMontagne feels confident it wouldn't take much to change it. "I think it would be easy to make it into a bar or a pool cabana," she says.

Further south on the barrier islands, George Freeman of Satellite Beach dreamt of his own tropical escape. "My husband had been visualizing our own tiki hut from cruises we took," says Sheila Freeman.

The 2004 hurricanes forced the Freemans to reconsider their outdoor priorities. "Our screened-in area was torn down and we needed to do something," says Freeman. Like LaMontagne and Thompson, the Freemans serendipitously found Island Mike's while en route to nearby Rockledge Gardens.

At first Sheila Freeman wasn't that keen about her husband's idea. It took four very special tikis to win her over. "I actually fought my husband on the tiki, but once I got a hold of the tiki faces, I was hooked," she says. Instead of plain poles, Freeman insisted on carved supports that sport unique tiki faces. "I didn't want the typical snarling tiki faces, but rather something colorful and happy," she says.

She found the perfect designs online and Island Mike's obliged her with the carvings. "Each pole has one-of-a-kind carvings," she says.

For good measure, Freeman asked Sciazza to carve out the emblems of her family's three alma maters, the University of Maryland, Florida State University and the University of Central Florida, on the hut's horizontal poles.

The Freeman gang is delighted with their new tropical sanctuary. "The backyard is so tiny that it wasn't usable before," says Freeman.

Now, with a digital television and patio furnishings, the hut is the hottest room in the house. "We've hosted football parties and we're always using it," she says. "It gets used every day."

The room has even proven an effective mediator in family disputes. "Whenever we have a disagreement about what to watch on television, one of us can go out to watch what we want," says Freeman. Ford attributes the continuing interest in tikis to their versatility and durability. "They are virtually indestructible and 99.9% waterproof," says Ford.

Although the typical Seminole-style hut is made from the all-natural materials of cypress and palm fronds, Sciazza builds tikis from construction grade bamboo as well as marine lumber. "You can use anything to build them," says Ford.

Sciazza is an expert at both residential and commercial tiki construction, from simple 8x8 Seminole-style shelters to the massive 40x70-foot tiki he built for Shooter's in Fort Lauderdale. "Mike also worked for years at the theme parks," says Ford. The shorts and flip-flops lifestyle that Sciazza's huts evoke makes them eternally attractive.

"It's the ultimate in outdoor living," says Ford.

Island Mike's is located at 2101 U.S. Highway 1 in Rockledge. For more information, call 504-4122 or log onto www.islandmikes.com.

