

glass houses

A Native Returns to Go Fantasy Real Estate Shopping in Malibu



To borrow a little from F. Scott Fitzgerald, let me tell you about the very rich. They have a lot of fun when they go real estate shopping. I can say this is true from experience because 20 years ago, I left Malibu – grudgingly – to go out in the world and seek my fortune. When I left, I wondered why I was leaving and now that I am back, I wondered how I ever could have left.

But I am back, and having been fortunate enough to find my fortune, I am back as a member of that class of people about whom F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote. I like to think of myself as one of the invisible rich. I am “low pro, bro” — if I may slip back into the California coastal surf vernacular I left behind 20 years ago when I moved to New York City. That is where I have been for two decades, in the meat markets, killing and being killed, but in the end making a killing – enough to get out and say goodbye and leave behind Times Square for fresh air.

After decades of living in apartments, townhouses and penthouses, I now want my own home. I don’t want a palace necessarily, but I want something that is clean and well lighted, quiet enough to hear the birds chirp and the whales sing — and private. My needs are simple: sunshine, surf, cool breezes, a nice view, a kitchen for making oatmeal in the morning, slicing ahi in the afternoon and grilling steaks at night, sunrises and sunsets and the desert stars at night.

I want to start surfing again, and I want to try that standup paddleboarding. Maybe I’ll buy a truck or golf cart to haul my boards around, or maybe I’ll save money and just buy a place on the beach and launch from under the house.

I came back to the 27 miles of scenic neighborhood to find that it has changed dramatically over the years, yet in other ways, it hasn’t changed at all. There are more houses from Topanga to County Line – some of them beautiful, some of them outrageous — but still, the houses are few and far between. In this crowded world, humans need space; we need privacy. That is one thing I learned during my time away, and it’s true from Montana to Mozambique: Squeeze too many humans into not enough rough, and you’ve got Trouble, with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for Population Density – which is one of the roots of many evils.

The population density of New York City is approximately 26,403 souls per square mile. Malibu has a population density of 629 people or so per square mile. To me it is a miracle that Malibu is essentially a rural, small town within 20 miles of 20 million people.

I hear people in Malibu bitch and moan about how the town has been ruined by new money and celebrities and development and yadda, yadda, yadda. But all I can say to that is: Leave town every once in a while and look around. Malibu is like Yellowstone compared to most American cities.

Some say Malibu is elitist, that “economic cleansing” is a barrier separating the common man from enjoying one of the best stretches of coastline in the world. I say, if that’s what it takes to keep one stretch of Southern California coast from being overrun by condos and strip malls and the creeping fungus of American suburbia, then that’s what it takes.

But enough of my yakking. I blew into town in the spring of 2008 intent on reconnecting with Malibu by buying a nice chunk of it — a place to hang my hat, park my Prius. I was aided and abetted in this quest by Jeff Chertow from the Malibu Colony office of Pritchett-Rapf & Associates. We raced around in his Formula One Porsche Cayenne down secret roads and through private gates, over hill and dale and valley and arroyo to show me five high-end Malibu properties.

Below are some of the thoughts that came to me as I took my big Chumash basket of sea-shell shekelim from one end of Malibu to the other – from sea level to the highest peaks – looking to find a home in the place I still consider my home. Let me tell you about being very rich and going real estate shopping in Malibu: It’s amazing what costs \$14 million these days and it’s equally amazing what \$14 million can buy.

SWELLEGANT



This place is new, I am told, and has been going up slow and beguiling on a lot that was stripped of everything in the fire of 1992. Lightning might not strike twice, but we all know Malibu brushfires can, so I approached this property with some hesitation. From below on PCH looking up, all that is visible is a wavy roof and a lot of glass, and this didn't appear to be a large place. Through the guarded gate at Sierra Retreat, past an enormous home owned by the son of some corrupt oil dictator or something, through a security gate and down a wide, steep lavish driveway, this house raised both eyebrows.

If someone had plunked a double-wide trailer and an outhouse on this lot they would be living the life o' Riley. The view is enough to make you spin around in circles then drop to your knees in a salaam. The lot is 1 acre, and from the east side, there is a view to the top of Saddle Peak down Sweetwater Canyon to the sea. Looking east you can see but not hear PCH, and you have a sidelong view of all the beach bungalows of Carbon/Billionaire Beach.

And then there, at your feet, is the God's Eye View of the Malibu Pier, Surfrider Beach, the Malibu Lagoon and Malibu Colony. From here you can keep an eye on the crowd, and shoot out to First Point to grab a couple when the population density drops under a hundred. I wonder if they would let me rig a zip line to the end of the pier? Probably not.

The lot and the house fill you with wonder, but I had to wonder: How did this lot with a \$14 million-plus view stay vacant for so long. Why hasn't someone snapped up this house?

The house on this lot is the double-wide version of a no-holds-barred, best-of-everything Malibu pleasure palace: 7,300 square feet of architect Jay Vanos' very best imagination, a Ceasarstone-and-water labyrinth that seems to have sprouted and spouted from the living rock.

The best room in the house is the combined kitchen/living room, all big and open and beautifully appointed with the finest stone below and high wood beams above in that wavy rough line. But it is the view from the living room out over the pier and Surfrider that left me with my mouth agape.

Remember that junior high phone prank: "Is Mr. Wall there? Is Mrs. Wall there? Aren't there any walls in the house? Then what's holding up the ceiling, stupid?" Well that is true of this house, as the living room is thinly separated from the outside world by high glass doors that slide away to let the sunshine and the seabreezes in to save money on the gas bill. It's brilliant.

You could spend the rest of your days sleeping on the sofa in that living room and using only the kitchen and still live happily, but there is much more to this home. Strolling through it is like the Winchester Mystery House tour: rooms, more room and rooms within rooms. The home theatre has a dozen seats even more comfortable than the Malibu Theater (maybe I'll make friends with some AMPAS members and watch their free screeners). There's a big, open room for yoga or jujitsu or dance, a home gym, maid's quarters and, and, and ...

The wildest room is the karaoke/entertainment/bar that must have been designed by an Arabic prince regent gone mad. Within this room is a closet-

sized wine cellar for storing a thousand bottles of Pellegrino, or whatever, and the other room within this room is a separate, enclosed smoking area. Now that is attention to California detail.

Inside is big, open luxury, but outside is the place to be: There's a swimming pool for washing away the salt of the ocean and the sweat of life. And at night, the hot tub takes in all the sparkle of Los Angeles, the jets lining up to land at LAX and the stars above.

This house of stone and water would seem to be fireproof, but if another brushfire were to sweep down Sweetwater Canyon and take it all away, I would still have the lot, and FEMA is pretty good with providing the double-wides.

I could be happy here.

3510 Sweetwater Mesa Road

Listing price: \$14,750,000

Listing Agent: Ani Dermenjian for Coldwell-Banker Malibu East

Rumor has it Joni Mitchell lived in this house, back in the day. Which day was that? Was it the Court and Spark day? I know her music well and wonder if it was the view from this house that inspired these lyrics to Trouble Child:

They open and close you
Then they talk like they know you
They don't know you
They're friends and they're foes too
Trouble child
Breaking like the waves at Malibu

This home is part of the Malibu Colony, but just outside the gates. Access is from Malibu Road where there always seems to be a lot of rattle and hum from cars and limos and cops and construction equipment. I am told this area was plagued with house beach parties during the summer of 2007, and there were paparazzi chasing heiresses and other troubled children all summer long. That did not create a good street impression of this house, which is crammed into a narrow lot, hard up against homes on both sides.

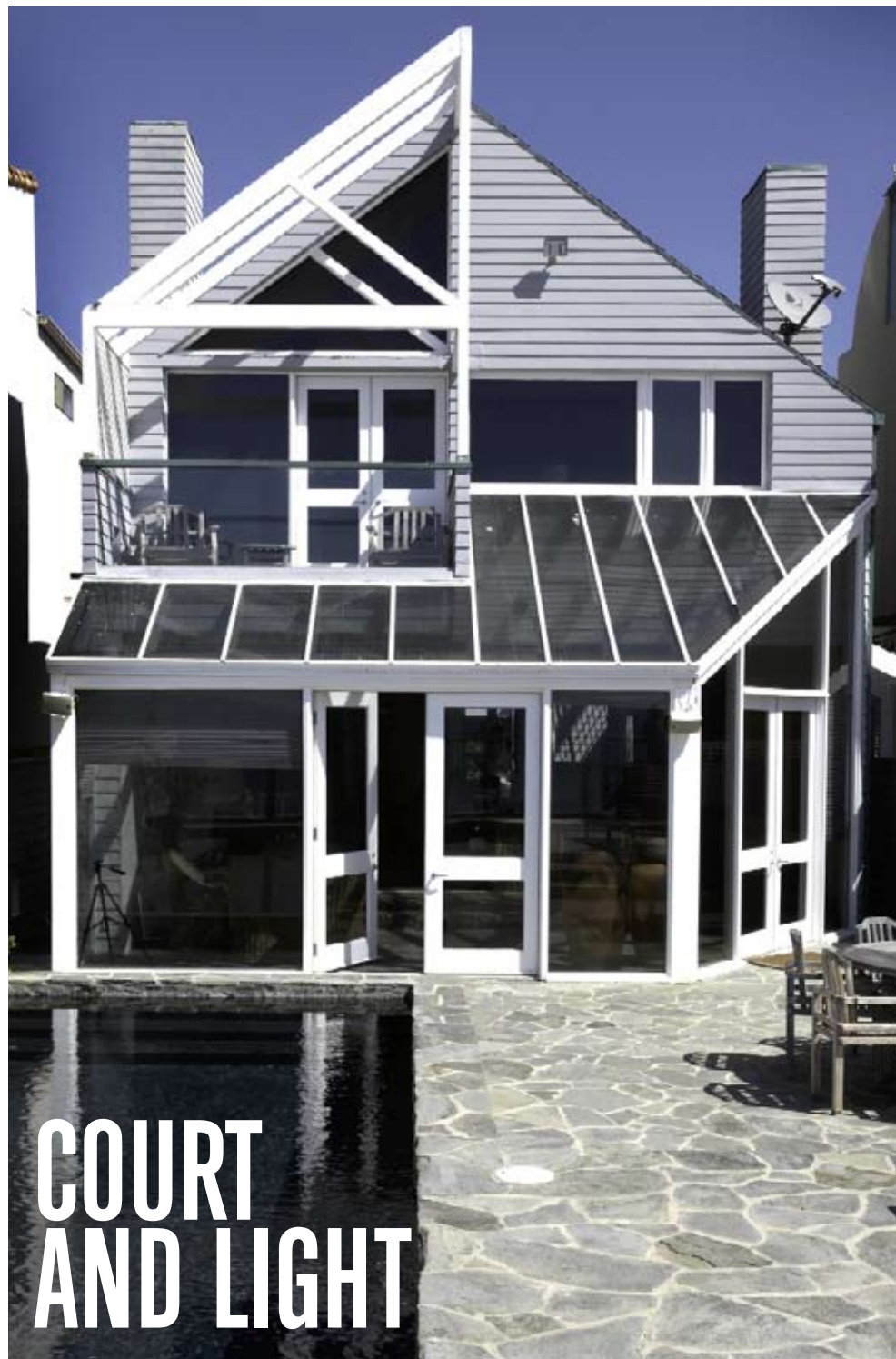
But the noise and confusion of the street evaporated the moment I walked through the gate and into a shaded courtyard, which cut off the noise and trouble and strife, and was like a de-stressifier. The courtyard is covered with a lattice that creates geometric shadows on the ground and is very satisfying to walk under and be a part of.

Chez Joni is longer than it is wide, like most Malibu Colony homes. The architect responded to this challenge by creating a two-story home with three bedrooms, four bathrooms and a lot of light and lines and angles. The horizontal lines accentuate the stretched length of the house and point everything toward the sea.

The living room leads to the kitchen then outside to a small backyard with a hot tub and pool — for rinsing off after dealing with all those breaking waves at Malibu.

Malibu Road homes don't have room for regular staircases, so a spiral stairway winds around upstairs to a master bedroom that overlooks the ocean, and it has a balcony that will let in those sweet sounds of the ocean — music as sweet as ... Joni Mitchell!

I was assured that the City of Malibu voted to limit party houses to preserve the domestic tranquility of this busy corner of Malibu Road from summer into winter. I was assured there would be fewer heiresses and paparazzi hanging around the neighborhood revving their Ferraris and playing that infernal rap music.



COURT AND LIGHT

This might be the house where Mitchell lived when she composed Court and Spark. One of the songs on that album, Free Man in Paris, was inspired by her friend David Geffen. He is still in the neighborhood, but Ms. Mitchell is long gone, and I have to wonder what she would think of her beach cottage and the neighborhood now.

23758 Malibu Road
Listing price: \$14,900,000
Agent: Jim Rapf



SEX ON THE BEACH

A date dragged me kicking and screaming to that Sex and the City movie, because she said I remind her of Mr. Big. I don't see that at all, but in the movie I couldn't help but notice that vixen Samantha and her younger boyfriend shacked up in this all-glass, sex-on-the-beach palace in Malibu. When I heard it was available, I had to take a look.

I could live in a place like this. Who couldn't? This home on Malibu Road was remodeled by architect Jay Vanos (after Ed Niles) on 50 feet of beach frontage — a lot of lot, I am told — and Vanos went big with 6,000 square feet of glass, stone, hardwood, sunlight and stars.

We entered from the beach and one of the first things I saw was the indoor pool ... table. The first floor has this pool table, couches, a big screen TV and a wine cellar that holds 1,000 bottles of Pellegrino. If I had any friends, we could have a good time on that floor.

The front of this house is a big glass atrium that connects all three floors, so when I stood on the first floor and looked up to the agent on the third floor, I could ask her the price. She flashed five fingers, three times. That's a lot of digits, but it buys a home in which all three floors are separate but still connected, and it's genius, because that glass atrium lets in all the beauty of the Malibu ocean view and blue sky and sunlight.

Floor two is the entry level, with a state-of-the-art kitchen, dining room, living room and that view to the sand and the beach: dolphins going to, whales going fro and standup paddleboarders threading through them. Once

I settle in somewhere, I am going to buy one of those standup paddleboards and go talk to the animals.

The kitchen is where they filmed the scene in which Samantha prepared handmade sushi and covered herself with it as she waited for her movie-star boyfriend to come home. Is that the effect this house has on women? It was a selling point that Dermenjian didn't mention, perhaps out of good taste, but a selling point nonetheless.

Floor three is for privacy. This is a "top-level master suite," literally and figuratively. A little closer to heaven than the rest of the house, the master bathroom has a glassed-in shower and a free-standing tub. The bed and the cabinets in the master bedroom are all custom designed, and the double closet would make that skinny chick with the shoe fetish from Sex and the City pass out.

Why am I talking about that movie? I got bored about halfway through it, but this house was the star of that show. Samantha left her boyfriend and bolted back to New York, which is madness to me. The good news is this crystal palace is still available, and I am sorely tempted to shake those three hands.

Inside scoop: Currently off the market, as it is being summer-leased for six figures.

24286 Malibu Road
Listing price: \$14,500,000
Listing Agent: Ani Dermenjian for Coldwell-Banker Malibu East

VILLA OCEANIA



Upstairs there is a deck area where I could stomp grapes or press olives. The view sweeps from Point Dume to Palos Verdes and from that angle, I saw a pod of dolphin, one spouting whale, a klatch of standup paddlers halfway to the horizon and pretty girls passing by directly below. “Hello! Wanna see my standup sauna? Hello?”

The deck leads to the guest suite on the top floor. The master suite is a half-level down and commands all 50 feet of beach frontage, and has two private decks off the bedroom and a master bath with steam shower and sauna. Nice. Very nice.

A spiral staircase fashioned after the interior of a conch shell leads down to the main floor, kitchen and living room. The present owner has a beautiful red-hardwood piano in the main room and a couple of electric guitars hanging from the wall. I snuck a chord on the piano and found this house sounds as warm and rich as it looks.

The living room is a little bit rock ‘n’ roll, but the kitchen is all country “as if it had been airlifted from Provence,” according to Char Hatch Langos, who was also impressed with the house from the wet sand exterior to the accessorizing. The person living in this house now has been a few places and bought a few things, and picked up good taste along the way as the house is nicely strewn with “a 19th-century Chinese wheel ... a piece of fence from Thailand ... French

doors in the living room ... barnacle-encrusted plates rescued from a shipwreck off the coast of Java ... Ketak cylinder baskets ... whale vertebra and a shark’s tooth...”

Well, I have a couple containers of flotsam and jetsam and art and artifacts I have collected in my wanderings, and this house would be the perfect place for them.

The interior and exterior of this house go back centuries, in a place that has been populated for only decades. Sometimes that viejo look comes off as pretentiously nouveau, but Mr. Hill and the owner pulled off a Mediterranean villa with style.

As I walked through the house I had James Brown’s voice singing, “This is a man’s world” in my head, because this is a man’s home. There is a big, hardwood dining room table that could seat 12, and I imagine my dumbass friends banging their knives and forks and shouting “More mead, wench!” and scaring the caterers.

Maybe I won’t invite them.

25030 Malibu Road
 Listing price: \$14,795,000
 Listing agent: Jeff Chertow

I looked up “villa” on Wikipedia and learned that villas were the McMansions of ancient Rome. Well maybe they were classier than that, but villa urbana were country homes easily accessible from Rome, while villa rustica were self-sufficient farm-house estates that produced their own wine and oil. By that definition, this 4,500-square-foot, two-story home on Malibu Road is a villa urbana, although I would call it a villa oceania.

This house is on Malibu Road, about halfway down. Jeff Chertow screeched up in his Cayenne and handed me an article by Char Hatch Langos in California Home and Design, which told me a lot about this place. It was built in the 1980s, but remodeled in 2006/2007 by interior designer Hunter Hill, whose usual line of work is designing retail spaces for the likes of Lauren, Hilfiger and Armani. Hill was OK with the exterior, but the interior had to go and he went for a viejo, country-by-the-sea feel that would have made Pliny the Elder feel right at home: hardwood beams above and rough hardwood floors below, iron gates and railings, stark white walls complemented by stone fireplaces, stairways, sinks and tubs—a natural, earthy house in a natural setting, on the same latitude as central Sicily and with a similar attitude.

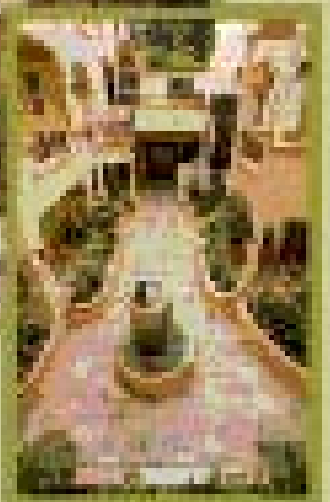


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