

“My happiness is here”

When the world-renowned interior designer Jacques Grange arrived in the chic Portuguese coastal enclave of Comporta 30 years ago, he found his paradise. Now a new residential development finds him ready to share it. By *Harriet Quick*

Photography by *Sanda Vuckovic*

Strolling through a meadow of sunflowers and olive trees, 77-year-old interior designer/architect Jacques Grange, wearing a pink linen shirt and cotton-gingham trousers, is in his natural habitat. “I created everything here, but I’m lucky. I found this cabana 30 years ago through my friend, Vera Iachia,” says Grange of his restored fisherman’s cottage, perched on the sandy soil amid the pines and dunes in Comporta, Portugal. “I bought it immediately from Vera’s mother.” Over the decades, Grange expanded his retreat, adding and restoring further single-storey cabanas with their typical thatched roofs, and landscaping the grounds with boardwalks and a swimming pool surrounded by wildflowers to blend with the wild, meandering beauty of the place.

Now Grange, an unofficial but passionate ambassador and guardian of the area, is collaborating with German real-estate developer Dietrich E Rogge (founder and CEO of Rockstone Real Estate) on a discreet development a short stroll from his own property. The Atlantic Club Comporta sits on 10 hectares and will comprise 21 villas nestled into a hillside that overlooks the Atlantic horizon in one direction, and verdant rice fields and the village of Carvalhal to the other. The topology is easy on the eye and feels protected from outside ones. Each house (or compound) can be built to the owner’s specifications, allowing for a personalised configuration of the one-storey cabanas (a pool house here, a guest house there), centred around a courtyard. Garden designer Madison Cox is collaborating with Grange on the project, and will source indigenous plants, shrubs and trees to cultivate bespoke gardens. As you walk the plot with the visual aid of CGIs, the appeal of the retreat they envision is easy to grasp.

In the Comporta region – effectively a 12,000-hectare stretch of coastline that runs from the Tróia Peninsula to Melides – great swaths of the land are protected and/or privately owned, making conspicuous development difficult and private ownership a rare privilege. Seven villages are dotted through the area, home to farmers, fishermen, local tradespeople and a growing swell of nature-loving international homeowners. It was once the secret summer sanctuary of some of Portugal’s eldest families, and it maintains a discreet air.

“It is not about who you are here, but about how you enjoy your life. It is reminiscent of the Mediterranean in the ‘60s and ‘70s,” says Rogge, who has holidayed in the area with his family for almost 15 years. “But it will never be spoilt because so much of the land remains in private hands and is preserved.” Surfing, riding, cycling, perusing the landscape, watching the migrating birds and a smattering of social gatherings add up to a holiday well spent.

The interest in and, indeed, fashionability of the area are once again on the up. There are other thoughtful developments in the offing and a clutch of eclectic new

Jacques Grange (left) and garden designer Madison Cox in front of Grange’s Comporta house



villas, skewing glass-cube and contemporary. By comparison, the Atlantic Club sells itself on its environmental and creative kudos that centre on discretion, subtle taste and blending in with the natural landscape. Plus there's the promise of great neighbours. The development is costing upward of €75m, with individual villas starting at €3m.

Grange, who continues to work with a stellar roster of clients including Caroline of Monaco, Aerin Lauder and Sofia Coppola, has an ulterior motive. "I also wanted to preserve the view from my side of the land," he smiles, waving in the direction of the Atlantic club plot, visible from his enclave. "I fell in love the first moment I saw the nature here, the wonderful beach, dunes and rice fields, and felt the mildness of the climate and the kindness of the Portuguese." Having Grange oversee the architectural integrity of your second (or third) home (he will also curate the interior if desired) and Cox (whose clients have included Ian Schrager and the late Marella Agnelli) 'scaping the gardens is a big lure for a certain kind of buyer.

Comporta has long been a place that people discover through the like-minded. Grange introduced model and documentary-maker Farida Khelfa, artist Anselm Kiefer and shoe designer Christian Louboutin to it many years ago; all have since bought or built properties. For his part, Rogge discovered the area in the early 2000s via the Espírito Santo banking family, which stills owns the largest swath of land (small plots of which they began to sell off in the wake of the 2014 banking crash in Portugal). Over the years, he became friends with Grange.

Back in the mid-20th century, when the roads were sparse, the Espírito Santos would arrive in their holiday paradise via ox and cart. Today the region can be accessed from Lisbon airport in under 90 minutes. As "escape" journeys go, it's a fine one: the urban skyline quickly fades and nature takes over, with a long road slicing through fields edged with abundant stone and cluster pines, cork trees and the occasional shack selling watermelons. It segues through the rice paddies flanked by telegraph and electricity poles topped with unwieldy-looking stork nests. The unusual biodiversity, the scents of lavender and pine, combine in an intoxicating way.

It's a place that is not conspicuously chic but unveils itself gradually. On arriving in the village of Comporta, a clutch of whitewashed shops and houses, one starts to sense the sophistication. There is Cavalriça, a restaurant fitted into a converted stable block, run by Bruno Caseiro and Filipa Gonçalves, protégés of Nuno Mendes. In a pop-up called Life Juice x Comporta, housed in a former tax office, you'll find primitive ceramics, benches and stools covered in Alentejo riding blankets and €300 silk pyjamas. Somewhere between the kale tempura, surf shorts and dust-blown SUVs, a picture of a community builds up.

"Life is centred in private houses, and people are very welcoming of new neighbours – it is not a 'closed shop'," explains Rogge. "There are only two hotels on this stretch, so entertaining happens at home." As other coastal areas in Europe become overcongested (and, as the summer of 2021 showed, very hot), Rogge is investing in the future of the Atlantic seaboard and in this cohort of design-minded internationals. "It's such an inviting country to all nationalities. I like the international sense of Brazil, Europe and the US. It's attractive – and rare."

Rogge is not envisioning an elite gated community. There's a single-storey "clubhouse" on the driveway up to the properties, where a team will be on call to make sure everything is "plug in and go", but there are no communal shindig areas, flashy signage or patrolling night watchmen. "Atlantic Club will extend that small and strong support base of Comporta lovers, and who will hopefully be around for a long time – and all their kids too," he says.

Wander into the fields and houses come into view that are not visible from the road. They might belong to



Left: Grange's outdoor dining area. Above: his Comporta home is a restored fisherman's cottage nestled among pine trees (right). Below left: the cottage's sitting room. Below right: one of its bedrooms



THE UNUSUAL BIODIVERSITY, THE SCENTS OF PINE AND LAVENDER, COMBINE IN AN INTOXICATING WAY.





The Comporta house of Frenchwoman Florence Grinda, with (clockwise from left) its pool (looking out over rice paddies), sitting room, main terrace and bedroom-terrace

GRANGE INTRODUCED ANSELM KIEFER AND CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN TO COMPORTA MANY YEARS AGO



Philippe Starck, Carlos Souza (co-author of the Assouline coffee-table eye candy *Comporta Bliss*) and a handful of other pandemic émigrés who turned their boltholes into year-round residences, including Françoise Dumas (the revered Parisian event-planner and an Atlantic Club ‘ambassador’) who found a house in the village of Carvalhal. In addition to an elegant timber mini-cabana (idyllic, she says, for supper parties), she recently added a home-office space, hung with a magic-realist collage painting by local artist José Canudo. “I spent the best part of [last] year here, and walking on a deserted beach in the Atlantic wind in winter was beautiful,” she says.

Over the past decade, the centre of gravity has expanded southwards to include Melides, a serene town edged by a lagoon about a half-hour drive from Comporta. Its denizens include Christian Louboutin and the Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen, who designed his clay-coloured residence, Casa M, in a 5.6-hectare retreat (Van Duysen’s good friend Julianne Moore was a guest here this summer, as his Instagram followers will have seen). The area also has low-key developments including Melides Art, founded by Miguel Carvalho and made up of a sculpture park, gallery, studios, residences and, soon, a hotel.

For the French who grew up holidaying in the not-dissimilar landscapes of Biarritz or Brittany, the region holds special appeal. “My father worked as a petroleum engineer for a Portuguese company, so I think Portugal is in my blood,” says Grange, who trained at the Ecole



Boulle before taking up an apprentice role at Henri Samuel, one of the foremost interior designers of the 20th century (among his many credits are various Rothschild houses and the restoration of the Grand Trianon at Versailles). He has a deep knowledge of the fine and decorative arts and a real eye for the vernacular; that signature harmony of the rustic and the refined has helped define the Comporta aesthetic.

His own cluster of cabanas, with their gracious open-plan outdoor living areas, features a wealth of artefacts that run the gamut from vibrantly painted Portuguese folkloric furniture to Giacometti sculptures and light sconces, to handsome 20th-century modern pieces; locally made animal mosaics are plastered into the whitewashed walls. “I feel ‘holiday’ as soon as I arrive. My happiness is here,” he says as he points out deep-set “aquarium” windows that frame the view, and a terrace furnished with a daybed and a bookcase. Each small structure has a slightly different interior mood, but they share flowing spaces, fireplaces and arching beamed ceilings, with few interior doors and no corridors. “The Atlantic Club is about allowing the landscape to dominate, not the houses; and about making something harmonious – not a [design] cocktail,” he says of his vision.

He has also designed the interior fittings and a furniture collection for the project, which can be ordered and customised to suit. Such extensions seem intuitive for Grange, who was once given the job of designing an entire château in Normandy for Yves Saint Laurent. (The brief was short: *‘L’air de Proust.’*) He regales with stories of vintage shopping with Andy Warhol, dinners with Saint Laurent, his friendship with Paloma Picasso. “You know in two meetings whether you can work with someone, if there is ‘trust’. I say what I feel,” he says. In 2017, he and gallerist Pierre Passebon opened the Stork Club in Carvalhal, a gallery-store that serves as his design office and a showcase of local artisans’ work – more sculptures by Canudo, ceramics by Bela Silva – alongside vintage finds and contemporary art. During lockdown, he renovated the upstairs floor, turning it into a series of suites to host visiting clients. A kitchen, clad completely in blue and white Portuguese tiles with white azulejo table, is inspiration in itself.

Madison Cox, the widower of Pierre Bergé, met Grange a few decades ago; the two began working together on Saint Laurent’s houses in the 1990s. “There’s a sense of renewal in Jacques’ work; he’s constantly questioning his perspective. What he did 20 years ago is not the same as today,” says the New York-based Cox, who also serves as the director of the Majorelle Gardens in Marrakech, which he restored. “He’s one of the few with a true understanding of culture, and he is also a big exponent of decorative art, whether a grand piece or working with local wicker artisans here.”

Unlike with houses, which are “fixed” structures, Cox notes, gardens are constantly evolving and responding to climatic change. “There’s great beauty in simplicity. I want to capture that spirit Jacques is imagining and create a palette of plants – and there is a multitude of resources in southern Portugal” – the pomegranate and fig trees, the lavender and grasses that flourish here. “I start with observing the winds, the plants, the soil.”

What’s remarkable about the area, given its proximity to the booming city of Lisbon, is that it has remained so untouched. Then again, maybe not so remarkable: the fresh Atlantic Ocean temperatures, rice-paddy mosquitoes and very low-key social life might act as deterrents for some. It’s a sort of natural selection in this still-natural place, which for the wilder at heart has proven to be its own version of paradise. ■HTSI
atlanticclubcomporta.com. Jacques Grange: *Recent Work* by Pierre Passebon, with photography by François Halard, is published by Flammarion this month