

# HILL COUNTRY HACIENDA

By MICHELLE BURGESS | Photography by JASON ROBERTS







When it comes to  
building and  
decorating homes, this ain't  
John and Betty Martin's  
first rodeo.

When the couple met and married in 1978, John's work in the oil and gas industry took them to Houston from their native Mississippi. In the ensuing 36 years, their home base in Katy was joined first by a ranch in Wharton, then a lake house in Canyon Lake. The weekend getaway spots fulfilled the Martins' yearning for, as Betty puts it, a return to "the country style of living" that these rural-raised transplants had grown up with and wanted to share with their own two children.

Once the kids were grown and married, the Martins sold the ranch just outside Houston and began a quest to find a larger property, ideally about 2,000 acres. Additional must-haves beyond size included space for John's big-game trophies and live-water access for wildlife; most of the couple's other

requirements were architectural or design-based. "We wanted a home that fit the beautiful hills of Texas where the American Indians had lived," Betty says. But it wasn't until John stopped in to visit a friend in Utopia while on a hunting trip that he — and soon Betty — realized that they had found their promiseland. It was in this, the southernmost corner of the Hill Country, where they found the ranch they would dub Kemosabe, the backdrop for the dream home it would take them years to plan, build and decorate.

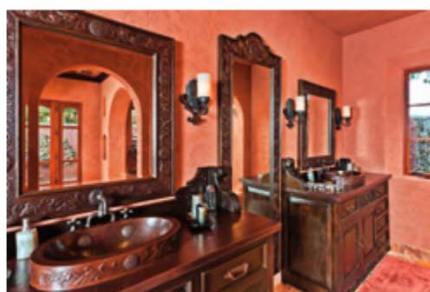
And what a home it is.

Incorporating influences from Spanish-style haciendas and classic ranches of Texas and the Southwest, the 17,000-square-foot stunner features rough-beam ceilings, dark wood and heavy iron accents, and dramatic touches throughout —

arches, stained-glass windows, richly detailed bodega ceilings and statement pieces such as the stand-alone copper vanities in the bathrooms and the two colossal 7-foot antler chandeliers in the trophy room.

Built around a large center courtyard, the home's outdoor living features are as comfortable as those indoors. As artistic as it is inviting is the infinity-edged "spool" — "bigger than a spa, smaller than a pool," Betty says. Regularly spaced niches display crosses, pathways meander, and a prominent tower facilitates stargazing. The outdoor gardens are xeriscaped to be water-friendly — one of many "green" features of the property, which also include reclaimed wood and rafters, walls plastered with earthen clay, hand-made clay tiles, geothermal heating and cooling, and double-paned windows and doors.





No detail was overlooked during the three-year construction and design process, says Betty, who worked with architect Dale Dibello of New Braunfels, project manager Judy Ramsey of Utopia, designer Catrina Kendrick of Boerne, and countless other subcontractors and suppliers throughout the Hill Country and beyond.

"All of the many details that made the project successful took major detailed lists and follow-through," Betty says. "Just finding the hardware for the doors and windows with a rustic authentic design took major research."

In the thick of things with the Martins was Judy Ramsey, with whom Betty became close friends during the building process. Having moved to Utopia at the age of 7, Judy is a near-native of the area who says that her rearing taught her

"to treat people with respect and honesty" and to give 100 percent in all that she does. These character traits served her well during the Martin project.

"When you take on a project of this magnitude out in the rural area of Utopia, you know without a doubt there are going to be some big challenges," she says. "I realized after a few weeks with Mrs. Martin that this was not going to be your run-of-the-mill house. I knew there was going to be a ton of research because of all of the intricate details and specialty items the Martins wanted."

Judy's first step was to address drainage and lay out the house accordingly. But despite the magnitude of the project and possibility of things going wrong, she insists that "God truly blessed" the entire process and says she is in awe of the

dedication of the contractors, subcontractors and vendors, whom she calls "the cream of the crop." Like Betty, Judy found the home's remote location to be the biggest challenge. From the transport of supplies to the overseeing of workers, the intricacies of constructing the mammoth showstopper required extensive forethought and planning. And that's before the interior design process even began.

"Betty and I spent many days and nights hashing things out," she says. "We had many miles on the roads and many hours on computers. My goal was to make sure without a doubt these homeowners were going to have the house of their dreams." Because of their close bond, Judy continued to work with Betty after the point when her role traditionally would have ended; typically, interior design is not part of her services.



It was in every way, Judy says, a once-in-a-lifetime professional and personal experience.

"My favorite part of this project was the glow on John and Betty's faces upon the completion of the hacienda," she says. "They became not only satisfied clients, but friends for life. It was very challenging but so rewarding."

Helping her and the Martins embrace the home's challenges was Catrina Kendrick, who has been in the design business for more than 40 years. Despite her long career, Catrina admits to being speechless when she first viewed the ranch's blueprints and renderings.

"The central courtyard had a bell tower over the front entrance gate — a real one," she says. "The main house had an observation tower that overlooked the dammed-up river and a picturesque view of heaven on earth. There was a magnificent outdoor kitchen off of an enormous porch. This home was to have all the bells and whistles, with unimaginable details, while sparing no expense."

All three women embraced the challenges of creating the Kemosabe Ranch abode, including designing and building 58 chandeliers and sconces, dozens of custom doors and cabinets, two fully tricked-out kitchens — one inside, one out — and myriad accessories such as candle holders. Regardless of a

proposed element's complexity, like the hammered copper panels in the cabinet doors, Catrina's response was the same: "No problem."

Betty Martin is as apt to talk reverently about all of the craftsmen, contractors and suppliers who worked on her home's features, from the 10-foot Mexican limestone fountain in the courtyard to the outdoor fossil art wall, as she is to want to bask in the grandeur of the finished project. That's not surprising, given its scope to rival that of the Taj Mahal. But having been so intimately involved in the process has given her an even greater sense of pride in ownership of her dazzling dwelling.

"It's hard for me to pick out the part of the project that I love the most," she says. "I confess that all of it was a major challenge. I loved it all. I especially love sitting on the porches and in the courtyard with family and with friends from North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, and even Africa, making memories." ❖

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