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ISLAND LIFE

The Kassioplia Estate in Corfu is a unique summer retreat, where the houses and gardens were designed and developed together to enhance their incredible setting

The limestone terrace of the main house looks out to sea to the Albanian mountains in the distance

“THE GARDEN PROVIDES THE ALL-IMPORTANT LINK BETWEEN THE ELEMENTS, THROUGH THE PLANTS, WHICH SEAMLESSLY INTEGRATE THE NATURAL CORFIOT HILLSIDE, BUILT STRUCTURES AND SEASCAPE BEYOND”

Some call Corfu the Garden Isle. Certainly its lush-but-rugged natural beauty makes it garden enough, a magical landscape of centuries-old gnarled olives and dark green sentinel cypress trees cloaking hillsides and mountains. In spring, the huge silver green canopies of Corfiot olive groves are under lit by drifts of wildflowers, such as the luminous purple honesty (*Lunaria annua*) in stunning combination with the acid green *Bupleurum rotundifolium*, while the daisy flowers of chamomile, irises, and perfectly formed orchids – to mention just a handful – dance along the edges.

Situated in the northwest of Greece, almost equidistant to the south of Italy, Corfu has a unique position within the country. The most northerly of the seven Ionian Islands, much of the island lies off the coast of Albania rather than its homeland. It is regarded as one of the most clement places in Greece to make a garden, owing to its high rainfall (an average of 1,200mm plus per annum, twice as much as London), high humidity, fertile soils, mild climate and relative lack of wind – especially when compared to the Cycladic islands on the eastern side of Greece.

The Kassiopía Estate is situated on a rocky headland in the mountainous northeast coast, just outside the small fishing village of Kassiopi. Approaching the entrance gate as you descend from the top of a steep hill, breathtaking panoramas come into view, out over the Corfu Straits to the Albanian mountains – snow peaked in winter.

Ten years ago plans were made to build a summer retreat on this perfectly located four-acre headland. Corfu's creamy limestone dresses well, making it an excellent building material. Architect Dominic Skinner, who trained and worked with Norman Foster and Partners in London, made perfect use of it in the creation of the two individual Corfiot houses on the estate. Indeed both architect and

stonemason have shown exquisite attention to detail in their construction, paying homage to traditional features, but creating modern, fresh spaces.

“The design of the Kassiopía Estate houses and gardens is instinctively and intrinsically linked,” Dominic explains. “The exceptional views were the inspiration for the creation of a series of spaces around and within the houses, each driven by a progression of the relationship between vista, mood, function, geometry, expansiveness and intimacy.” The result is almost a

sequence of theatrical ‘stage sets’, he says, “each influenced and informed by a particular view or atmosphere”.

A cloistered courtyard is central to the built space and from this a series of stone terraces and intimate pergola spaces provide rest and retreat. They are connected by stone paths, which progressively lead into the wilder areas of the garden. “Pause spaces become increasingly informal,” says Dominic, “for example, a simple seat beneath the shade of a magnificent wild pear. The aim is a wonderful, balanced

TOP The hot dry planting begins at the driveway, which features tall, wispy cypress, lavender and olive trees

ABOVE Low-growing Mediterranean species such as thyme, cistus and helichrysum line the paths

OPPOSITE The planting also features *Stipa tenuissima* and *Tulbaghia violacea*





TOP The infinity-style swimming pool magnifies the spectacular sunsets
BOTTOM An acacia underplanted with *Rosmarinus officinalis* Prostratus Group
OPPOSITE Steps lead down onto a decked seating area



living environment... enhanced by the sounds of the sea, the scent, texture and form of the gardens and the exquisite detail of the houses."

Thus indoor and outdoor spaces are closely entwined, so that the dividing lines between house, garden and sea become almost imperceptible. The garden provides the all-important link between the elements, through the creation of a natural and sensuous mosaic of plants, which seamlessly integrates the natural Corfiot hillside, built structures within and seascape beyond.

The design philosophy capitalised on the natural habitats existing on site, and these became the framework for the garden. Thus the first step in the garden's creation was to prune and shape the existing trees and shrubs to once again reveal their natural beauty. Brambles and *Smilax aspera* engulfed other species in thickets of *maquis*, some four or five metres tall, as all strained for light in the impenetrable mass of growth. As this unruly pair of scramblers were teased away from the trunks of Kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*), Italian buckthorn

(*Rhamnus alaternus*) and mock privet (*Phillyrea angustifolia*), a delightful woodland began to emerge, and alongside it the potential to create winding paths through glades of multi-stem evergreen natives, leading down to the water's edge.

Sufficient daylight poured through to allow long-dormant cyclamen to emerge from deep slumber. A couple of exceptionally large and beautiful wild pear trees were similarly rescued from prickly prisons. Under their uplifted crowns, Star of Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*) and *Muscari* species took advantage of perfect niches on freshly revealed rocky banks. Areas of unmanaged waist-high grassland were mowed in early summer, and then again in winter to lessen the dominance of aggressive grasses; quickly they reverted to a rich meadow flora, particularly notable for an extensive colony of Barbary nut or afternoon iris (*Moraea sisyrinchium*) in March and April. Earlier in the year, the ghostly flowers of the Elysian fields of mythology, *Asphodelus aestivus*, shimmer in the winter sunshine. The results of this early work reinforced the





LANDSCAPE PLAN

- PLANTED TREE
- WOODLAND
- MAQUIS STYLE
- PHRYGANA STYLE
- 'MEDITERRANEAN' GARDEN
- MEADOW-ORCHARD

conception that the natural diversity of the site should be our guide. There are two distinctive microclimates on the headland. The main house is situated on the northeast side, benefiting from cooling sea breezes in summer, but exposed to biting cold winds blasting down from the Albanian mountains in winter. Everything planted here needed to be tolerant of temperatures that sometimes dip below zero. The smaller guest house is more sheltered with a southeast aspect, and this created an opportunity to plant tender Mediterranean species in the

sheltered environs of the house – such as the popular and well loved *Bougainvillea* spp, *Plumbago auriculata*, *Agapanthus* spp, *Ruellia simplex* ‘C. Wright’ and *Citrus* spp. Where screening was required, a multi-layered canopy of native trees and evergreen shrubs was planted. Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), *Bupleurum fruticosum*, lentisk (*Pistacia lentiscus*), *Teucrium fruticans* and tree medick (*Medicago arborea*) formed the underplanting to classic Mediterranean native trees such as Judas tree (*Cercis siliquastrum*), Mediterranean hackberry (*Celtis australis*), holm oak (*Quercus ilex*) and carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*). The

ubiquitous Mediterranean species olive and cypress were consistently key to the planting structure. Closer to the houses, a rich mosaic of phrygana planting (the Greek equivalent of *garrigue*) flows seawards with footpaths made of local stone meandering through. Carefully placed olives and pomegranates provide some shade and height, with care taken to frame rather than obscure vistas. The cushion-shaped, often prickly and aromatic *phrygana* plants offer up wonderful opportunities to play with texture, form, aroma and colour, stimulating the senses and also enhancing the Corfiot stonework.

Grey-green mounds of *Cistus creticus*, *Thymus capitatus* and *Ballota acetabulosa* blend with silver *Helichrysum italicum*, *Lavandula* spp, *Convolvulus cneorum* and rich green *Rosmarinus officinalis*. Carefully selected for performance, pastel-flowering perennials such as *Verbena bonariensis*, *Tulbaghia violacea* and *Gaura lindheimeri* harmonise with the colours of the local palette. As the landscape rolls away to the sea, drifts of the grass *Stipa tenuissima* self-seed prolifically, weaving in between the blues and greys of the native cushion shrubs, dancing on the merest whiff of a breeze to create

the movement of the sea. They glow gloriously in the early morning and as the light fades at the end of the day. Rainwater harvest contributes to summer irrigation for those plants that need it, but the emphasis is on deep infrequent watering to encourage strong root development and plant independence. As the garden matures, self-seeding becomes a natural way for the garden to continuously renew itself, with the gardener on hand to facilitate its progression. It is possible to stay at the Kassiofia Estate in Corfu. To find out more, go to www.kassiofiaestate.com

ABOVE The guest house and its stone terrace with seating area and swimming pool. The design of the house and its surroundings are intrinsically linked

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NURSERIES
• Pepiniere Filippi is a French nursery with wide range of Mediterranean natives selected for drought tolerance. RD 613, 34140 Meze, France Tel: + 33 4674 38869 www.jardin-sec.com

• Chrysanthé Paraiou is a small Greek nursery with a range of Mediterranean natives. 6-8 Asklepiou/Socrates, Nea Penteli, Athens, Greece Tel: + 30 210 6135962.

• Karamatsos Nursery is a large nursery supplying a range of native and exotic plants including a good variety of trees, climbers and large shrubs. Kalpakioi 17, Kato Souli, 19007 Marathonas, Greece Tel: + 30 2294 064500

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