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Moorish Mood

Morocco meets Mexico in a fiesta-bright beach house.

Volume 5, Issue 2, 2008

By Kim Palmer

When a home overlooks brilliant azure water, the interior palette often takes a supporting role. That's certainly the design norm in San Jose Del Cabo, Mexico, an upscale vacation enclave.

"It's a special place, one of five in the world where the desert meets the sea," says interior designer Sandra Espinet, who has offices in both Cabo (Square One) and Los Angeles (Interiors by Sandra Espinet). Her Cabo clients tend to favor subtle, neutral hues in their beach getaway homes, she says. "Most of my clients have million-dollar views and want to focus on the ocean."

But there are occasional exceptions, such as the woman who recently hired Espinet to create a Moroccan-inspired beach house. "She had just come back from Morocco and had all the colors in her mind," Espinet recalls.

Morocco is a world away from Mexico, but the locales share some of the same aesthetic DNA, according to Espinet, who grew up in South America and has traveled widely.

"The Moors invaded Spain, and Spain invaded Mexico," she notes. The architecture is different, but the cultures share a kaleidoscope of vivid colors. "In both Mexico and Morocco, nothing is perfect but it all works together. It's fun."

That harmonious free-for-all was exactly the effect this client was seeking. "She said, 'I want every room in my house a different color, with pattern everywhere,'" Espinet recalls. "My first thought was that it was too much. But it's her home, and her personality. I really listen to the client. And if you met her, that's her. She's very colorful and fabulous with large jewelry. She looks like her house."

Espinet spent a day and a half with the client, who picked out her favorite colors and just one element: a bold striped fabric in orange, gold and bright aqua for the dining-room chairs. That fabric set the palette for the home.

Espinet knew that such a color scheme could easily dissolve into chaos. "The challenge was making sure all those colors flowed together so it didn't look like a circus," she says. "My job was to keep it sophisticated."

Every room was painted a different color, just as the client requested. The palette carefully transitions from Rave Red SW 6608 in the dining room to two shades of orange — Harvester SW 6373 and Torchlight SW 6374 — in the living room, and golden yellow, composed of Inviting Ivory SW 6372, highlighted with Harvester, in the foyer. The arch separating the red dining room from the rest of the house was accented with cool Drizzle SW 6479.

"We did several adjustments," Espinet says. "In the living room, it went too orange at first, so we added some white." The client's vivid pink bedroom turned out "too much, too girly," so Espinet had her painting contractor add a wash — white paint mixed with water — to create an ombré effect on the walls. "There's a gradation of color, deeper at the bottom [Lei Flower SW 6613] near the floor, then graduating to a lighter color [Sockeye SW 6619] toward the ceiling," she says.

To soften the rainbow hues on the walls, Espinet used a multilayered process. First, a Venetian plaster was applied to add texture. Then the walls were painted, then painted again with a lighter color wash, using a faux-finish technique. Finally, to create a delicately patterned Moroccan effect, an artist applied wall and ceiling details, using stencils.

Espinet chose Sherwin-Williams paint in a semi-gloss finish. "Cleanability was important," she says. The client has grandchildren and needed an easily scrubbable finish. And in Mexico, the maids customarily use wet mops, she notes. Water splashes onto walls, making matte finishes problematic.

Before Sherwin-Williams opened a store in Cabo, Espinet used to bring paint from the United States because she preferred Sherwin-Williams to the Mexican brands available. "Sherwin-Williams has the quality for the quality homes we're doing," she says. "And it gives me flexibility for creating custom colors."

For this project, Espinet pored over books on Moroccan design to find patterns that would harmonize with the colors and fabrics she had selected. She finished the home with an eclectic mix of finds and furnishings from all over the world, including both Moroccan and Mexican pieces.

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The client didn't see the Cabo home until it was completed. Her first reaction? "She started to cry," Espinet recalls. "I thought, 'Oh, no! She hates it!'" But fortunately, they were happy tears. "She said, 'It's even better than I imagined.'"

Conquering Color

Sandra Espinet shares her insights for creating complex color palettes that clients will love:

- **Bon voyage.** "Travel is my passion and inspiration," says Espinet, who often takes clients on the road with her to soak up ideas and source artifacts. "If the person is willing to get on a plane and go with me, I like to do it." For a client who requested a traditional Mexican look, for example, Espinet knew just the place to take her: the Old Colonial section of San Miguel de Allende.
- **More is more.** When it comes to samples, Espinet doesn't skip. "I drown people in what we're doing," she says. "I like people to feel a gut instinct. The sooner they pick things, the better."
- **Stay connected.** "For this project, we were on the job site a lot — every two or three days," she says. "It's very important with so many colors and textures. If one color was a bit too dark or too light, we were able to adjust it."

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