

LIFESTYLE



Kyra with her husband
Simon and their children
Iris, Oscar, Dru, Finlay
and Talulah

Sea change

Just across the river from the Dominican Republic holiday home of her childhood, KYRA MONTAGU has created a very different haven of calm and simplicity, with a focus on spirituality and holistic living in harmony with its Caribbean setting

TEXT PAMELA GOODMAN | PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MASSEY



Casa Palapa is set in rambling tropical gardens surrounded on three sides by the *Caribbean Sea*



OPPOSITE: Simon with Dru in the dining room of Casa Palapa, Kyra's childhood home. THIS PAGE ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP Iris, Kyra and Dru on the casa's terrace. One of its guest bedrooms. A partly al fresco seating area at the casa. Its exterior. Simon and Kyra (centre)

The plan had never been to return full-time to the Dominican Republic but, having lived in Spain and India, and spent time training as a doctor in natural medicine, the search for somewhere to set up a holistic practice led Kyra back. And with her came husband Simon Furlonger – who was similarly in tune with forging an unconventional life – and the first two of their gaggle of children. They now have five: Oscar, 12, Iris, 10, Finlay, eight, Talulah, five, and Dru, two. ‘Plans aren’t made, things just happen,’ says Simon with a kind of beatific calm.

Together, Simon and Kyra scoured the island for a place to settle, ending up by coincidence barely a hop, skip and a jump from Casa de Campo; only the Chavón River divides their new home, Ki-Ra, on the east side of the river from Casa Palapa on the west. Geographically close the two houses may be, but in every other respect, life could not be more different. The river is quite literally the divide between rich and poor – the shiny marina of Casa de Campo offset against the traditional Dominican village of Boca Chavón. Kyra remembers riding on horse-back or paddling in canoes back and forth to the village to play with friends as a child, long before the river was dredged to make way for superyachts.

You can still cross the river estuary by boat, which the family sometimes does, but navigating it is more complicated these days. Instead we bump down a long, dirt track for 15 minutes or more to reach Ki-Ra, turning off just before we get to Boca Chavón. Kyra winces slightly at the suggestion that the name of their house is a play on her own name, careful to point out that for the Taíno tribespeople who used to occupy the land here, Ki-Ra means ‘birthplace of the earth spirit’.

And spirituality is essentially what Simon and Kyra’s lives are all about – not so much in the sense of conventional religion but in a general interconnectedness between people, place and nature. Theirs is a life of gentle harmony, of trying to live as sustainably as possible while embracing the world around them. And what a world it is – bohemian, for sure, as dogs, goats, pigs and children run riot through an abundant garden that stretches down to a rocky shoreline. Hammocks are slung through the trees, paper lanterns light pathways at night-time, and dawn is greeted with a chorus of birdsong. The medley of thatched, colourful buildings has expanded over time, from the ▷



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT At Kiki's bar with Kiki. Charlotta, the family's pig. In Boca Chavón village with Antonio and Guillermo [chk?]; the latter is an engineer working with Simon on a sustainable energy scheme. Taking the boat across the river. An al fresco yoga class. The guest tower at Ki-Ra (centre)



Theirs is a life of *gentle harmony*, of trying to live as sustainably as possible while *embracing the world*

single pink house where Simon and Kyra lived for three years with no electricity or running water, to a fully functioning smallholding complete with vegetable garden, a two-bedroom guest tower, a spa treatment room, alfresco yoga shalas and a swimming pool. There is even Wi-Fi.

On a day-to-day basis, they run Ki-Ra as a bed and breakfast; several times a year, they turn the whole property into a dedicated holistic retreat with yoga, meditation and diet as core principles. Kyra also teaches yoga locally at Casa de Campo and operates a small reflexology and natural healing practice, creating lotions and potions on her kitchen table from an infinite supply of plants and trees. There are more than 3,000 indigenous plants in the Dominican Republic, 90 per cent of which can be used medicinally. Kyra tells me this while taking cuttings from a 'miracle' Moringa tree in the garden. The paracetamol and malaria pills in my wash bag seem strangely obsolete.

If Kyra is the doctor, Simon is the architect, overseeing the 'grand plan' to expand the whole offering of Ki-Ra, with more accommodation, a beach perhaps and a larger spa. There was a moment, prior to the 2008 financial crash, when investment prospects were good, but since then the couple have sensibly scaled down the project. Now it is one step at a time, with hopefully a few new rooms in the imminent future and, all being well, a scheme to develop sustainable energy in conjunction with the local village. We walk there one afternoon, along dusty streets of ramshackle, brightly coloured houses, past the dilapidated cock-fighting pit and Kiki's bar, to meet Guillermo,

the engineer assisting Simon with the energy project.

So where does Casa Palapa fit into all of this? For the time being at least, it is still part of their lives. Simon and Kyra continue to manage and run the house on behalf of the extended family, holding the occasional retreat or workshop there, and renting the property out (through Airbnb, no less). And it looks just as glorious as it ever did – better perhaps, after a recent makeover by New York-based interior designer Micky Hurley, who painted the buildings white (they used to be salmon pink) and who introduced flourishes of colour and pattern throughout.

We have lunch at Casa Palapa one day, in a beautiful spot shaded by a lattice of bougainvillea and backed by the sea. The vegetarian food is exquisite, cooked by Felicia who has looked after the Montagu family for years and whom Kyra has retrained to produce only the healthiest of recipes. As we drive away, I get the feeling that, when the moment comes, Simon and Kyra won't be all that sorry to see the house go. Their lifestyle in the Dominican Republic doesn't really fit the Casa de Campo mould and while some might consider what they have created at Ki-Ra to be a rejection of her upbringing, Kyra and Simon see it as an extension, a moving-on, a new-generation way of prioritising life differently. So as one story ends, another is just beginning □

Ki-Ra: ki-ra.com. British Airways (ba.com) flies direct from London Gatwick to Punta Cana from three times a week. Return fares start at £605

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Kyra with the girls on the beach. Hanging out on a hammock in the garden. The outdoor dining terrace at Ki-Ra. With Lorel, who organises guest stays and retreats. A beach bonfire. Kyra preparing a vegetarian lunch (centre and centre left) OPPOSITE All the family together on the beach

BELOW Lunch with friends at Casa Palapa, including Micky Hurley (far right), the designer behind the casa's recent makeover