

# Summer's always in season here

Decor and artifacts combine to give a Victoria house an all-season sun-and-sand feeling — and it isn't even on the beach

By SUSAN DOWN

**VICTORIA** It could be snowing outside, yet inside the compact James Bay house owned by Ron Aird and Tom Hoff summer would reign. As casual as sand between your toes and as relaxed as wearing clamdigger pants, their one-year-old house would be right at home on a NanUCKET beach.

Clean and light is what they were aiming for, said Hoff, who wanted to maintain the summer beach cottage look after they moved from Saltspring Island last year. They always paint their walls white, believing that the neutral colour highlights whatever they hang on the walls, conferring on it instant artifact status.

It's clear that the owners are good at assembling old castoff items and turning them into art objects. Pieces of old staircase spindles, old wrought iron brackets and even old shutters from their last house are displayed with reverence. "We don't collect anything that becomes expensive," says Aird.

They are so clever at creating an indoor ambience that the men have sold the house and are moving again, back to Saltspring Island. They plan to open a new cottage decor store, called Houseboat, in July.

Still they will be sorry to leave the neighbourhood after only a year of settling in. Created by Zebra Design, with interior design consulting by Sandy Nygaard, the house is one of a pair built by developer Rob Mickelberry as part of a small-lot subdivision. Each house is on a 33-foot-wide lot, requiring a long, narrow home.

"The neighbours were worried they would look like cereal boxes on their sides," said Mickelberry. Now their forms and finishes fit easily into an old neighbourhood without being dishonest replicas.

To improve the traffic flow inside, the front door is located halfway down the side of the building. "There's not a lot of room taken up with hallways. There are living spaces at both



**A summer place: Even the exterior of the beach-style house in James Bay looks clean and light.**

PHOTOS BY RAW SMITH/VICTORIA TIMES COLONIST

ends so you can get away [from each other]," said Aird.

The men bought the place when Mickelberry was at the drywall stage a year ago, early enough so they could demand their own finishes, but they showed great restraint. They learned their lesson after pouring money into their last house, a 1916 farmhouse they ran as a bed and breakfast on Saltspring Island.

This time they stuck to a spec builder's budget, demanding that the interior look great but not be over the top financially, says Aird. That means birch instead of maple cabinets, laminate instead of granite counters and oak floating floors. Carpeting upstairs is wool sisal. They also upgraded from miniblinds to the wider birch plantation blinds.

The men are ideal customers, said a mover in the middle of

their last domicile shift. That's because they had nothing but light and easy-to-carry wicker and distressed wood pieces that could stand another ding or gouge if the crew nudged the door frame hauling it in.

The main rooms are simply furnished with major upholstered pieces covered in simple fitted slipcovers of white cotton duck. Window drapes are made of the same material. A painted, round oak



**Relaxed: Upstairs hallway (top), living room (above left) and dining area illustrate the capricious but uncluttered look of the interior.**

table with four black wicker chairs presents a crisp look for casual dining. A wooden chest from a family friend is the kind of coffee table that you can put your feet up on with impunity. A skiving unit with a peaked roof was custom built to resemble a beach cabana.

What keeps the house looking Ralph Lauren stylish rather than cheap and junky, is the fact that the rooms have just the right number of collectible pieces, and no more. In each direction is a tableau: an antique pine drop-leaf table beside a black and white print of a Fraser River gill-netter; white bedding and wicker beside a funky lamp with a bronze fisherman base; and old

ship models lending a nautical touch to the rooms.

The backyard is tiny, as befits the small lot, a perfect combination of low maintenance and high relaxation value thanks to the small summer house, built by Mickelberry. With clematis and climbing roses for the walls, the place is crammed with willow furniture, an old birdcage, a bust of a young girl and two mirrored windows from their old barn.

Inside and out, the house is capricious without being cluttered, an all-weather beach house that speaks to our memories of sandcastles and seashell collections.