



# The Blue House

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*With a dramatic coat of paint, the architect couple Johan and Gardiol Bergenthuin have reinforced the main design concept of their Gordon's Bay holiday home: that of go-between for mountain, sea and sky.*





## blue is a real chameleon

Blue is a real chameleon: at once cool and calm, the clear skies and shimmering ocean of a seaside holiday; then all of a sudden turning cold, a dreary grey cloud that leaves you feeling dejected and gloomy.

Luckily, Johan and Gardiol Bergenthuin haven't experienced the moody blues since deciding, just before the first winter rains last year, to repaint the central part of their holiday home in an intense blue.

"Very early in my career an old lady told me that no interior is complete without a swatch of blue," Johan laughs. "It's a colour that brings other colours to life, she mused."

The Bergenthuin's "blue period" started in an entertaining roundabout way. In 2005, Des Armstrong got a bee in her bonnet and gave her Mexican decor shop, Hadedda, in Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg a coat of luminous-blue, water-based paint which she'd been importing from Mexico for a good few years.

According to Des, the colour, known as Azul Colonial, is prolific all over central America, especially in Guatemala and Mexico. (Frida Kahlo's famous Casa Azul – The Blue House – in the Mexican capital is painted the exact same shade.)

"It's the vibrancy that appeals to people," believes Des, "and the fact that it changes with the weather. One day it looks blue-blue-blue, and the next it is suddenly purple-blue and then it morphs to blue-black... It's certainly never boring."

Johan often drove past the shop, relishing the cheerful, dynamic colour that had a different shade to show every day. It seemed to have a certain longevity – never fading or losing that initial intensity, the way other dark paint colours often do.

"Gardiol and I have been madly in love with rich, deep colours and their magical effect for years," says Johan, "but it's not your average taste – most people shy away from such boldness. I can't recall how many property agents warned us that bright houses don't sell."

After a year of weighing the pros and cons, Johan decided to try out Des's Azul Colonial in the meeting room of the architectural practice he shared with his late partner Louis Louw.

"There was an amazingly positive response," he says. And so the seed was planted to experiment with the blue at the cubist Cape holiday home which the family designed and built in 2002.

"We started with a doorframe," Gardiol says. "And added accents of colour bit by bit. We realised it was very daring – our own daughter declared that the house would become a depressing blue cave – but we persevered, knowing we could always repaint if it didn't work."

According to Johan, they in fact wanted the central double-volume heart of the house to resemble a saturated blue cavern in order to

enhance the design concept of the house – that of borderless mediator of the exchange between sea (the view to the north stretches from Simon's Town, past Table Mountain to the harbour of Gordon's Bay), the Hottentots-Holland Mountain range (to the south at the back of the house) and blue sky.

When you arrive on the middle of the home's three levels – the level accommodating kitchen, living and dining room and the courtyard with its square, heated pool – it feels as if the Mexican blue literally sucks you in. Initially, you're somewhat overwhelmed by the intense colour, but barely five minutes later, you can hardly believe that everything that is now blue was once the same sober grey-brown shade (Plascon Plattsville) as the exterior of the house and the kitchen and dining room on either side of the main double-volume space.

The blue suspends boundaries and even tricks you as to where inside ends and outside begins; it makes the house new and even more dramatic, simultaneously tempering the bright coastal light that floods in from the outside. And yet, as the lukewarm winter sun moves through the house, you realise that even the parts that are shaded are never frosty or gloomy.

After the Bergenthuius spent years holidaying on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast, you can understand why they now come down to Gordon's Bay at least six times a year to relax.

"The kids used to really enjoy the warmer South Coast waters, but once you're done swimming, there's nothing much more to do or see," Gardiol explains diplomatically.

"We're not really the G-string or golf course types," Johan sighs.

"The Cape region is so incredibly rich... The mountains and the ocean are central, yes, but there is also a richness on a cultural level. When we're here, we often drive around exploring and when we decide to just stay put, we each take a seat on our favourite chair and just take in everything around us," says Gardiol.

"And when we've had enough of our view, we swap places and look afresh," says Johan, "because that's really the best thing about our house: you see the world through the house, and thanks to the new colour, you see the world afresh." **V**

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- Visit [www.visi.co.za/visi18](http://www.visi.co.za/visi18) to see the Bergenthuin's original house as it first appeared in VISI 18.
- Visit [www.visi.co.za/thebluehouse](http://www.visi.co.za/thebluehouse) for a behind-the-scenes video of this shoot.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The transition space between living and dining room, also seen in the right-hand photo (taken from the mountain side across the courtyard); Philippe Starck Faitoo crockery in the scullery; Where does house end and sky and sea begin? Table Mountain visible in the distance; A painting by the architect Johann Slee hangs on the "border" between lounge (right) and glass doors leading to the courtyard (left). **PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT** Gardiol Bergenthuin exits from the front door on street level. The blue apertures on the wall look onto the courtyard. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT** The courtyard with heated swimming pool is on the mountain side of the house and features a carving by an unknown artist. Johan jokes that it is a symbol of their relationship: a woman sitting on a man's head! **OPENING SPREAD** Johan stands in a doorway with stairs (not seen) that lead to the balcony. The outside frame of the picture shows a stained glass window by Elsabe Greef. **NEXT SPREAD** The main bedroom with its view of Gordon's Bay and the Hottentots-Holland Mountains.

