



# LIFESTYLE

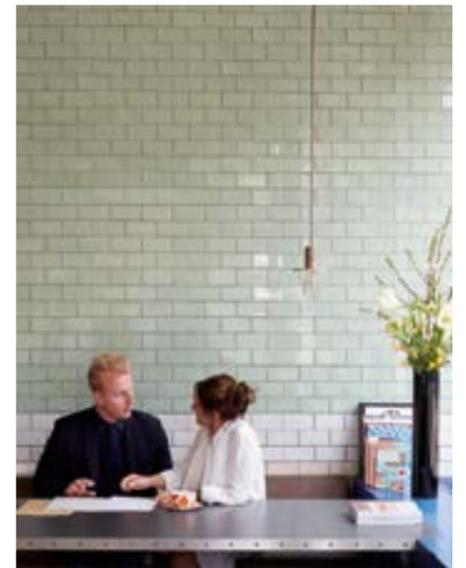
Ros Byam Shaw meets Claire Lloyd and her partner, artist Matthew Usmar Lauder, who moved from London to a small village on the Greek island of Lesvos, where they run a guest house and have become part of the local community

PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MASSEY



OPPOSITE Claire on Lesvos with two of her rescue dogs, Hector (left) and Nellie. THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Matthew's 'covert art' posted on a wooden shutter in the village. Claire and a local fisherman return from a boat trip in Kalo Limani. The kitchen in Ken's Spiti, Claire and Matthew's guest house. Matthew in his studio





**W**e all have dreams: more free time; less debt; adventure; a house by the sea. As we accrue complications, one of the more persistent dreams is for a simpler life. Australian author, photographer and designer Claire Lloyd and her British partner, artist Matthew Usmar Lauder, left the London arts scene and moved to a small village on a Greek island in 2007. Since then, they have been living that dream – give or take a few property deals, book launches, exhibitions and dips back into city society in London and Sydney.

According to Claire, this powerful change was set in motion almost on a whim. 'I was complaining about a loss of creativity and a friend showed me a picture of a holiday house she had bought on Lesbos. I loved the look of it and decided to see the island for myself. Another friend, Domenica More Gordon, agreed to come along, and that is how it began. We stayed in Molyvos, a port overlooked by a Byzantine castle, and came across our village as the result of a detour. Wandering down the narrow, paved streets to the *platia*, where the men of the village were gathered under a huge plane tree, we were welcomed into the *kafeneio* by Ralitzia, who is now one of my closest village friends, and presented with a series of delicious Greek dishes. It may sound unlikely, but I already felt that I had found my new home.'

Lesvos is the third largest of the Greek islands, its granite shoulders almost nudging the Turkish coast, its steep, rocky slopes dark with pine, chestnut, wild oak and olive groves. Birthplace of Sappho, visited by Aristotle, who began his zoological investigations on the shores of the huge lagoon that expands inland from the sea in a balloon of sparkling seawater, it is sparsely populated and unspoilt.

Buying a property proved surprisingly uncomplicated. Claire engaged a local estate agent and word of mouth soon turned up a house for sale, known as Papa's Spiti after its previous occupant, *papa* meaning priest and *spiti* house. The village wraps around a natural amphitheatre facing the Aegean and Papa's Spiti sits so near the top that the view >

BOTH PAGES CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Claire outside Wild at Heart in Pimlico with its owner, florist Nikki Tibbles. Outside Westbourne Grove 202 cafe. Rob Atkins of estate agents Domus Nova discusses properties with Claire. In Battersea Park with six of her rehomed dogs. An aerial shot of her latest project in Scotland. Shopping for antiques and lamps (also above centre) in Golborne Road. At the London offices of her book's publisher, Catharine Snow

JOHN MASON



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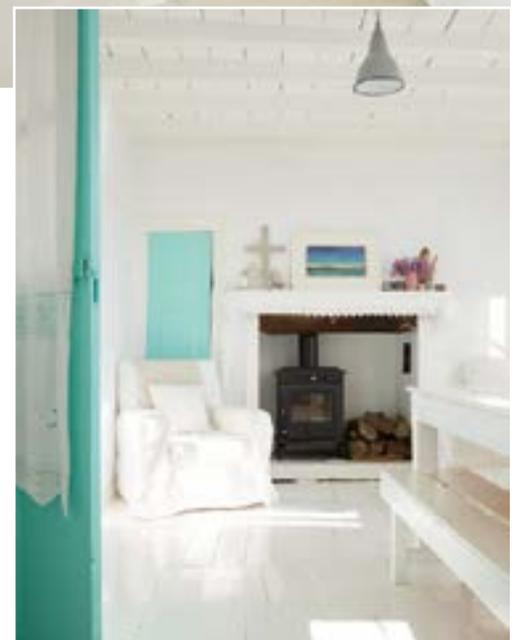
from its gates sweeps down across the terracotta pantiles of the village roofs and past the modest dome of the church to the distant line of blue where dark sea meets cerulean sky. The view was the clincher. A few months after Claire's visit, cash was exchanged for two heavy keys, and the house was theirs.

Claire's book about her new life, *My Greek Island Home*, was recently published in the UK, with a launch party at Wild at Heart in Pimlico. Owner Nikki Tibbles was among many friends, including art directors, artists, designers, architects and writers, who feasted on meze served from the van of The Grilling Greek. The book tells the story of village life on Lesvos and is illustrated with Claire's sensuous photographs. A patchwork of pictures of Papa's Spiti before restoration shows rooms still full of clutter and walls painted in the brilliant turquoise that brings the summer sunshine into these plain, unpretentious village homes.

Matthew enlisted the help of his childhood friend, artist Marcus Browne, and set to work transforming the worn, jumbled interior into a series of white spaces, washed with sunlight and sparsely furnished with pieces found, mended and made. The finished house is beautiful – chaste and so plain that anything decorative, whether a tin mug brimming with flowers or a mottled feather, acquires the status of a work of art. ▷



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The kitchen, a meditation room (below) and the living and dining room (bottom right) in Claire and Matthew's Lesvos home. In their guest house, the bedroom is combined with the living area





A year later, Claire and Matthew bought a second village house to accommodate guests. And last October, Matthew set up a studio in two rooms overlooking the *platia*. Here he teaches and works on his own striking pieces, which range from vibrant, rhythmic landscapes to mysterious monochrome images of ghostly figures. Having begun his career heading up scenic art at the National Theatre and gone on to work as a scenic artist and set designer for everyone from The Rolling Stones to the Royal Shakespeare Company, Matthew can turn his artistic hand to anything but has a style of his own that is as strong as it is original. He particularly enjoys what he calls 'covert art'. These outdoor pieces may be discreet wire heads, hung from an old nail on a wooden shutter, or something more dramatic. 'My favourite is a large rock balanced on the wall of a ruined house, which turned to gold overnight,' he says, before adding, 'thanks to a spray can of gold paint!'

Claire's career saw her working for a similarly prestigious list of clients. Meanwhile, she redesigned several London properties, including the airspace at the top of a building in Clerkenwell, where she created a spectacular penthouse that she sold to architect Zaha Hadid. Her current project is the sale of a decommissioned radar station known as Gin Head at the entrance to the Firth of Forth in Scotland, where planning permission has been granted for an outstanding single home.

Here on the island, village life continues: men gather in the *platia*; women make cakes and biscuits in the kitchen of the village co-op; salesmen trundle through, the backs of their trucks loaded with plastic chairs, fresh fish or local fruit. In spring, there is wild asparagus to gather and Easter to prepare for; in summer, there are visitors to entertain and long evenings of eating, drinking and music. Autumn is the olive harvest.

Claire and Matthew have joined in and become part of the varied texture of this close community, learning the language, cooking local specialities, being adopted as unofficial photographers for special events, helping and being helped, entertaining and being entertained. Always city dwellers, both are astonished at how they have adjusted. Part of this 'seismic shift' was their recognition that there were cats and dogs that needed help. This less idyllic aspect of island life sees dogs kept on chains, and unwanted puppies and kittens dumped in bags. Claire and Matthew have fed and medicated dozens of cats, and adopted and rehomed a string of dogs, most of whom have been flown to Britain.

'Recently, we met up with six dogs and their new owners in Battersea Park. It made me feel like weeping, they are all so healthy and happy,' says Claire. Helped by other like-minded animal-lovers on the island, and with support from Dog House, the charity founded by Nikki Tibbles, they have paid for the village strays to be neutered and spayed. And slowly, the attitude of the villagers to these previously unwanted animals is changing, and softening.

In the spirit of hospitality that is so much a part of the Greek island culture, Claire and Matthew now take guests, two at a time accommodated in their second village house, Ken's Spiti. A stay here offers more than the usual tourist experience as you are welcomed into village life, greeted with a cheery '*yassas*' as you walk along the alleys scented with lilac and jasmine, or sit in the *platia* sipping a strong, sweet *cafe ellenikas*. A week in their guest house might include an afternoon cookery class in a village kitchen, a visit to an ancient monastery, or a day drawing and painting outdoors with Matthew. And, of course, they know the loveliest and quietest beaches, and the best tavernas □

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Matthew Usmar Lauder: [www.matthewusmarlaunder.com](http://www.matthewusmarlaunder.com)



OPPOSITE FROM TOP Matthew and Claire chat with local man Pandelis outside the *kafeneio* (coffeehouse). Local man Christos. Molyvos bay. Trixie, Nellie and Bertie outside the house. Claire with a travelling salesman selling produce. THIS PAGE Matthew and Claire walk their dogs back along the track from the sea to their home