

COVER FEATURE



AND THE BAND PLAYED ON... THE ESTATE OF VILLA MARIA

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In a swirling sweep of brilliance, the spiraling center staircase of Villa Maria reveals itself in an air of gracious welcome. Through massive bronze doors, guests are ushered into a home where the lavishness of New York's Gilded Age meets an aura of effortless luxury to create an effect that personifies Southampton's unmistakably elegant, modern allure.





Originally built in 1887 by the partners of Lombard, Ayres & Company, the home in its early years traded ownership among a various array of captains of industry; each vying to claim her splendid attributes as their own. 1910 marked the start of the home's reign as Grey Gables, christened as such by shipping magnate Edward P. Morse and his wife upon the purchase of their summer retreat. In 1931, after having been owned by several others including the stage actress Ann Murdagh, the Sisters of the Order of St. Dominic acquired the property and bestowed upon her the name she carries today, Villa Maria.

After more than seven decades in the Church's care, the property changed hands once more in 2005, this time to her current owners. After assuring the nuns that their beloved seaside retreat would be well loved and lovingly restored, the new owners began the process of turning back the hands of time to bring the edifice known as Villa Maria, back to her intended state of exquisite elegance.

As it exists today, the home is a study in grandeur. Overlooking Mecox Bay, her stone façade and rolling lawns give way to endlessly breathtaking water views. It's an idyllic, opulent setting redolent of *The Great Gatsby*. It's an impossibly romantic place where if one listens carefully one can almost hear the tinkling of crystal, Daisy Buchanan's laughter and melodic notes from a jazz piano drifting throughout.

Despite its mammoth proportions, the 22,000sf Villa Maria is convivially warm; an effect no doubt created by the masterful, architectural renovation led by Andre Tchelistcheff combined with the impeccable personal style of the Master and Mistress of the home - themselves prominent, preeminent design figures. The estate is surrounded in privacy afforded by a stone and wrought iron fence, an allee of evergreen *Cryptomeria* and a border of crushed stone and lush gardens; the portico of the home opens into a foyer where limestone floors and carved details frame a water view that captures your heart as it commands your attention.

"The home is baronial," says Tim Davis, "it simply cannot be equaled or duplicated in the Hamptons today." As the top broker with the well-known Corcoran Group as well as a Hampton native, Davis understands the intrinsic local importance provided by the home's history and sheer, unadulterated beauty.

Indeed, it's difficult to decide where to set eyes upon first entering Villa Maria. In the library, leaded glass panels are set within artisanal cabinetry and sit adjacent to a hand carved fireplace. Hardwood floors and beautifully honed stone gleam underfoot while ornate plaster



mouldings adorn the ceilings above. An elegant solarium is situated beneath a vaulted mosaic ceiling from which a massive chandelier is suspended. It's a spot that once served as chapel to the sisters of St. Dominic and today serves as a peaceful oasis. Throughout the house, homage is paid to the opulence and history of yesterday while fresh, modern touches ensure Villa Maria is as livable as she is grand.

Across the back of the house a long, spacious hallway is flooded with sunlight; the regal running punctuated by glass nooks that offer intimate spaces to read, relax, or simply drink in the water views beyond. At one end of this formidable expanse is what was formerly Villa Maria's ballroom, now the home's main salon. Despite its cavernous dimensions – nearly 60 feet in length – the living space feels invitingly comfortable, rife with warmth. Deep, white canvas covered seating flanks an enormous floor to ceiling limestone fireplace, while art and family photos bring life to the space. The sheer scale of the room is exemplified by the stunning, yet almost benign, appearance of a gleaming baby grand piano sitting in one corner – the piece serving as an accent to the room despite its own, impressive proportions. At the opposite end of the hallway sits the formal dining room where pale tones of cream and white are lit by sparkling chandeliers, a bespoke fireplace and the sunshine that streams in from the myriad windows. Just beyond the dining room is the butler's pantry – a misnomer for this elegant, glass encrusted room that is stalwartly stunning in its own right.









Located off the formal dining as an intimate breakfast room. As welcoming for pre-dinner cocktails as it is early morning coffee, the sunlit space makes the most of the rolling lawns and water views to the rear of the home.





On the lower level, the spacious wine cellar is an intriguing wash of dramatic light and curves. With custom shelving to cellar a stellar collection, the glass enclosed climate controlled space is adjacent to a sitting area perfect for impromptu tastings.





Despite the dinners and galas that the home has undoubtedly played host to over the decades, no compromise has been taken when creating the more private spaces. The kitchen of Villa Maria is a sunny, sprawling space with a limestone fireplace at its center against an ocean view backdrop. Expanses of white marble give way to every imaginable gourmet convenience including a six burner Wolf range, twin dishwashers, drawers for freezing and warming, and a Sub-Zero refrigerator. Beyond the kitchen, a glass enclosed dining loggia and a staircase lead to the marvels housed in the lower level. It is there that one will find a wine cellar worthy of bringing even the most seasoned sommelier to joyous tears as well as a spa wing that includes a sauna, steam room and massage room among its offerings.

A master bedroom suite, eight ensuite bedrooms, and three additional bedrooms are located on the upper levels of the home, though should those accommodations in the main house not be adequate additional quarters may be found in the attached artists studio or the gatehouse – itself a two bedroom, 2,400sf jewel box located on the grounds of Villa Maria.

From days spent sailing to evenings spent celebrating to nights spent peacefully wrapped in a cocoon of luxury, Villa Maria is truly a home that is more lifestyle than structure. It's a slice of sunlit heaven within a carved stone shell where the band can play... on and on. ✈