

A SEASIDE STATE OF MIND

Since swapping London for Rye, Fiona Harkin-Wood and Sam Wood have curated a new wave of coastal cool from a shop and holiday home in the heart of the ancient citadel

WORDS JESSICA JOHNSON PORTRAITS & SHOP PHOTOGRAPHS LOUISE HAYWOOD-SCHIEFER

Just pure beach joy!' says Fiona Harkin-Wood, as she watches her three-year old son, Buzz, bounding fearlessly into the sea at Camber Sands. The waves wash over his knees and he lets out a shriek of delight as family Border Terrier, Milly, joins him in the shallows, with dad, Sam, in tumble-grabbing reach.

'I love this stretch of coast. In summer there's a real melting pot of people here but you can't beat it out of season when you can lose yourself in long, windy walks and see horses emerging out of autumn marine mists galloping along the sands,' says Fiona. 'Best of all, it's a great place to raise a family.'

For the pair, family life with a toddler and two dogs revolves around sand dunes, beach paddles and ice cream – a far cry from the frenetic city grind they left behind. In late 2013 the couple swapped London for Rye on the East Sussex coast. Juggling a serious renovation project with globe-trotting work commitments – Fiona was working as a trend forecaster for Stylus Media Group while Sam was building up his consultancy business – the pair spent weekends zipping between city and coast for house DIY and a dose of sea air for the best part of a year.

'It was a case of stop the bus, we want to get off,' says Sam. 'We were just desperate for space but as soon as we passed through the Dartford Tunnel every

weekend it felt like we could breathe again. Coming back on a Sunday evening began to feel oppressive, however it was a reaffirmation that Rye was the place we wanted to be.'

Within a year of settling by the sea, Fiona was in a position to leave the city commutes behind, along with an increasingly stressful job. In summer 2017, just a few months after the birth of Buzz, she noticed a shop to let on Lion Street, (formerly the independently-run Lion Street Store) which was based in a Grade

II-listed, 16th-century building right in the heart of the ancient citadel.

'It was the ideal opportunity for us, and we also loved the fact that it was essentially two businesses in one, as the shop came with a B&B above,' explains Fiona. 'Moving to the coast had offered me space, and time to think up new creative ideas at my own pace. I knew I wanted to create a new coastal style that was all about being by the sea and celebrating life on the edges, boundaries and borders.'

Marsha by the Sea opened in October 2017. The independent store imbues a clean and stylish coastal aesthetic that takes you straight to the shoreline, drawing on Fiona's years in fashion, interior and global design – along with her canny knack for tracking just what's trending, when. The collection of clothing, homewares, children's toys, classic books and restorative beauty products is tightly curated, and yet Marsha wears her style lightly, embracing the timeless allure of the ocean and the fact we're all a bit better off for a blast of salty, sea air. Sandy shoes are welcomed.

TAKING STOCK WITH HEART

Clothing lines are a luxe mix of nautical classics underpinned by fun and functionality. Try out a traditional fishing smock for size, handmade by >>>





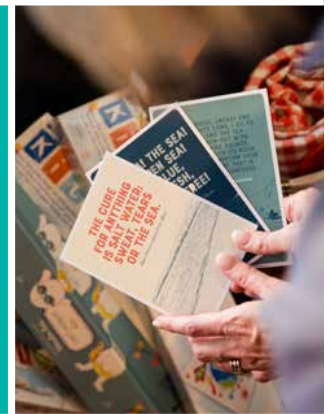
North Norfolk-based makers Carrier Company, an up-styled Breton sailor's hat by Béton Ciré or thick rubber wellies by Novesta. There's Petit Bateau for both kids and adults and bright, unisex rainwear by Dutch brand GoSoaky amid rails of soft, organic cotton in the form of funky T-shirts from StepArt and kids' jerseywear by Tootsa MacGinty, which also offers a recycling service for its pre-loved clothes.

Fiona is committed to spotlighting both rising brands and local makers, in particular those with an ethical edge. Sustainable seaweed soaps from Margate-based Haeckels join artisan skincare products from Le Baigneur, which donates a portion of profits to the charity Surfrider Foundation Europe. There's vegan footwear from Melissa jelly shoes, utilitarian staples from apparel designer Colchik, which plants a tree for every garment made, and – in the cosy corner full of traditional children's books and games – some brightly coloured tug boats and submarines from Green Toys that are made using 100% recycled plastic. Think style with genuine substance. ➡➡➡

ABOVE In October 2017, having moved south from London the previous year, the couple opened their shop, Marsha By The Sea. It's a Grade II-listed 16th-century building in Lion Street, Rye BELOW The whole family are loving their new life by the coast in East Sussex – here they are enjoying the waves at Camber Sands



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CROW'S NEST PHOTOGRAPHS: FIONA HARKIN-WOODTIDES BOHINC



A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Unsurprisingly, Marsha By The Sea has acquired a quiet cult following as well as offering an organic way for Fiona and Sam to find their place in a new neighbourhood. 'Everyone on our street is lovely and we've been welcomed with open arms. You take risks and gambles to move out to a seaside town so you have to make the opportunities work for you,' says Fiona.

'Rye has just brought us space and peace, and we feel so much closer to nature and being part of a real community. But you have to give it back to the place as well. It feels like the town is emerging from a bit of a sleeping beauty phase, and it feels exciting to be part of that change.'

Some of Rye's latest visitors will be staying at The Crow's Nest; the two-bedroomed self-catering hideaway that sits above the shop. Opened in April 2018, Fiona describes the original space as a 'shell', which required a complete design overhaul.





Now, after furnishing the space straight from Marsha's shop-floor, the century-old beams are warmed with hand-cast brass nautical lighting from Davey, homemade cushions and sea-inspired enamelware dress the chairs and tables while one-off pieces – including upcycled lamps and a wall of weathered brass plates – form part of Fiona's ever-growing collection of goodies sourced from the antique-stacked stores of Rye's Old Town.

'We've hosted visitors from Italy to North Carolina, and we both love that side of the business too,' says Sam. 'We laugh as we've now become our friends' new go-to holiday home. We tell them they're welcome, as long as they can cook and clean for themselves!'

SIREN CALL TO THE SEA

On days off, Fiona loves nothing more than exploring the vast southeast coast – whether it's watching the kitesurfers from the shingle beach at Jury's Gap or taking a reflective stroll along Hastings Pier.

'There are some hilarious and some very touching dedications pinned to the Pier – I find it one of the most restorative and energising places to be, whatever the weather,' says Fiona, as she stands by her counter looking every inch the modern shopkeeper. Behind the till is a mounted

illustration – Marsha's brand image – which features the iconic red hut at Rye Nature Reserve and a picture of a young girl snapped on the beach in the 1970s. The girl pictured is Fiona's mum, who sadly passed away in November 2016.

'I'm from a traditional working class Yorkshire family so that meant holidays to Scarborough, Whitby and Blackpool. I remember every time I came back from working abroad I just longed to go back to Whitby to re-set. My long-term love for scuba diving that began as a teenager and that feeling of being weightless in the sea has never left me.'

'That's partly who Marsha is,' continues Fiona. 'She's a muse – a siren call to the sea – a voice telling us to escape, to enjoy, to be creative, to be different, to stop for a moment and take in the view. Mum saw the empty shop with me and I know that she wanted me to do something with it, to take it on as my own. My muse – my 'Marsha' – is my mum. She remains the voice in my head telling me to know who I am. And I want people to get the same enjoyment from being by the sea that I do.'

To find out more or shop online, visit marshabythesea.com. To book a stay at The Crow's Nest, visit airbnb.co.uk/rooms/24367473.



THIS PAGE Sam and Fiona feel like part of the vibrant community in Rye now through Marsha By the Sea and their letting business, The Crow's Nest. Living here has made a huge difference to them

FIONA & SAM'S RYE

- The red hut at Rye Harbour nature reserve has become quite a landmark. The reserve will soon have a snazzy new visitors' centre so you can sip a flat white while learning how to distinguish a shoveler from an oystercatcher (sussexwildlife.org.uk/visit/rye-harbour).

- The Whitehouse Café does the most amazing cakes, breakfasts and lunches from dynamic foodies Rosie and Claudia, with fresh bread from The Lazy Baker, Richard. Pray that they've made their knockout muffins on the day you visit or the much sought-after Chocolate Salty Balls (01797 224748, whitehouse.rye.co.uk).

- Kino is an award-winning conversion of a former school into a boutique cinema. Read a magazine in the armchair by the fire and then settle down into comfy cinema seats to catch the latest flick (01797 226293, kinodigital.co.uk).

- Bag the cosy table for two by the fire at The Ypres Castle Inn (01797 223248, yprescastleinn.co.uk) or soak up the live music at The Standard (01797 225231, thestandardinnrye.co.uk). The Globe Inn Marsh is a quirky pub-restaurant just outside the town (01797 225220, ramblinns.com/the-globe-inn-rye).

- Don't miss the ice cream from the legendary Ice Cream Window at The Mermaid Street Café (01797 222128, oldborougharms.co.uk).

- The Hoolie Café at Rye Watersports Centre is situated on a lake – learn to paddleboard then tuck into a burger (01797 225238, ryewatersports.co.uk).