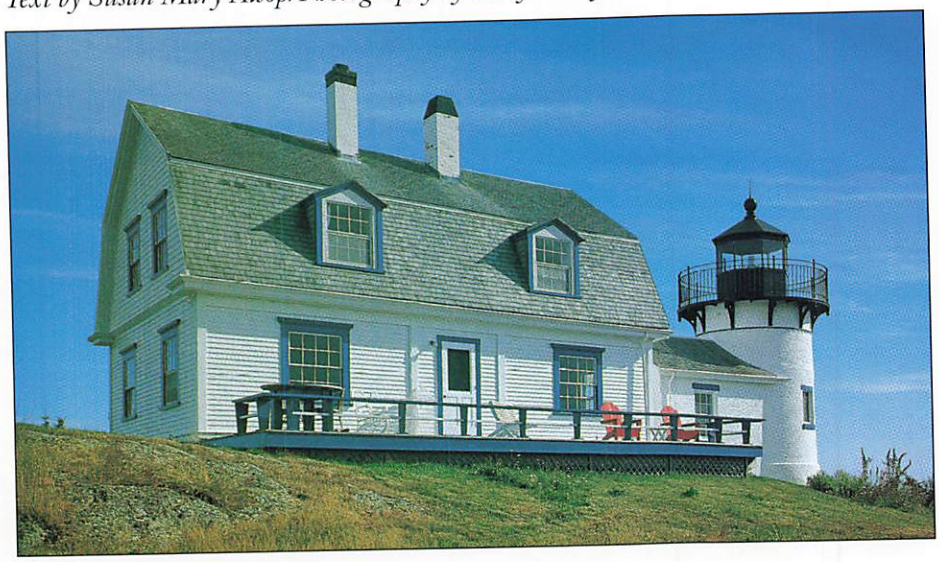
TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

A UNIQUE SUMMER RETREAT ON MAINE'S BEAR ISLAND

Text by Susan Mary Alsop/Photography by Story Litchfield



LEFT: "It was in terrible shape," Fabiola Martens says of Bear Island Lighthouse in Maine, which she restored with her husband, Dr. Martin Morad.

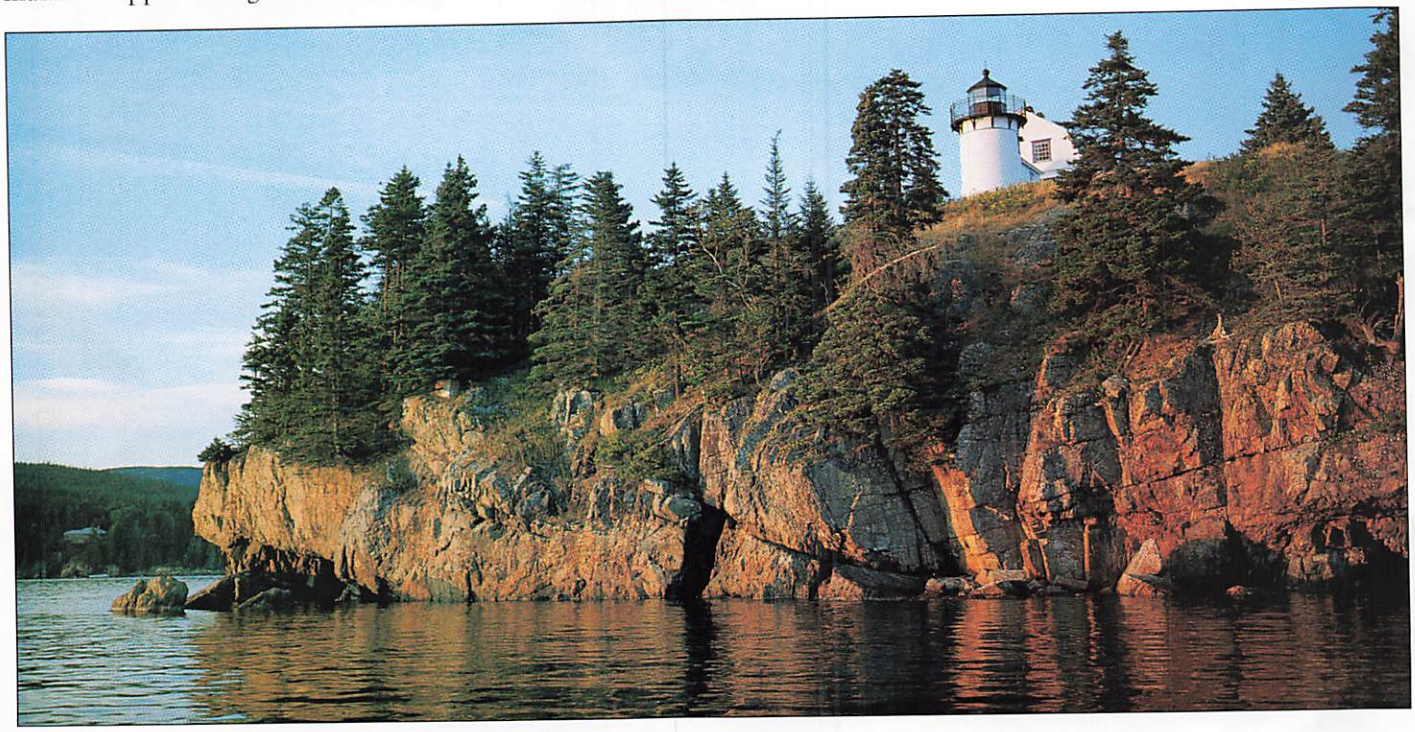
BELOW: The eight-acre island's lighthouse and adjacent keeper's house, which were built in 1889, are set above a rocky cliff named Martin's Leap.

THE RESIDENTS OF THE SMALL town of Northeast Harbor, Maine, were sad when the news came in the mid-seventies that Bear Island Lighthouse would be automated and the keeper's house closed down. For navigational purposes a lighted buoy would be perfectly adequate to serve mariners approaching the harbor, but the beautiful little island the lighthouse stood on had memories for everyone. "There's Bear Island; we're nearly home," the incoming sailor would cry on seeing the familiar cliffs looming ahead, or, "Watch it—the fog is so heavy that I can't even see Bear!"

In 1987 the National Park Service took over the property, which included the lighthouse and keeper's house, a toolshed/outhouse, a generator house and a boathouse. Lack of funds prevented proper maintenance, and in 1988 it was decided to sell or lease these structures and the land around them at public auction. The condition of some of the buildings was deplorable, for there had been years of abandonment and neglect.

It happened that a romantic and courageous couple were eager to take on the task of restoration. Martin Morad was born in Tehran, educated in Europe and the United States, and is a professor of pharmacology and medicine at Georgetown University, specializing in heart research. His wife, Fabiola Martens, is Belgian by birth and a former lawyer who is now an interior designer in Georgetown.

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LEFT: "Every window frames a wonderful view," says Martens. Two garden rocking chairs face Southwest Harbor and Greening Island.

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Morad had visited Mount Desert Island, which shelters Northeast Harbor, in 1971 while engaged in a scientific project. A friend showed him Bear Island Lighthouse, and he fell in love with it and attempted to buy or lease the property from the United States government. Nothing came of the effort for many years, but by 1989, having spent seventeen summers in Maine, he had succeeded in acquiring a long lease with permission to restore the lighthouse and its attendant buildings. He married Martens in 1992.

The lighthouse itself had withstood the test of time rather well; new electric wiring and a fresh coat of paint were all that was needed. The keeper's house was the worst off. There was no running water, electricity or sewer system. The keeper and his family had depended on rainwater collected in basement cisterns.

Martens remembers the difficulties

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"We wanted to retain the house's openness and airiness." BELOW LEFT: An English pine table set with Metlox pottery centers the dining room.

"This area reminds me of Scandinavia, so I added a new twist to the interiors—bright, Nordic colors," Martens points out. BELOW: The bedroom.





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"The renovation required hard work. We carefully followed historic preservation guidelines." RIGHT: Adirondack chairs rest on the front porch.

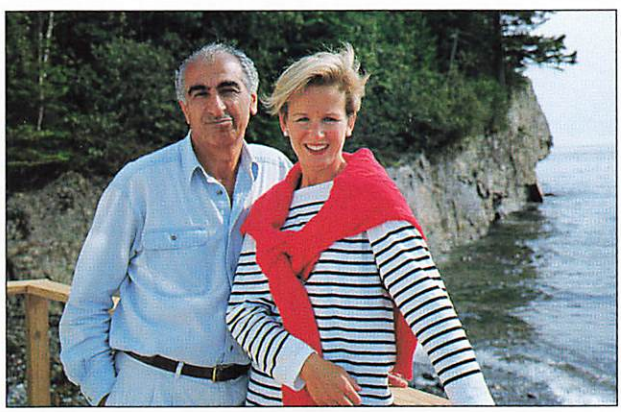
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they faced. "The house had been boarded up for so many years that the humidity from the water in the cisterns permeated the entire place," she says. "At every inspection the lighthouse keepers had added another layer of paint, without ever removing any of the old paint. Over the years the dampness caused the eleven layers to crumble and form stalactites and stalagmites. It was as if one was entering a grotto!"

She looks back on her husband's solution to the water problem as his greatest triumph. "The most adventurous project was the laying of an undersea pipeline," she recounts. "We decided that getting fresh water from Mount Desert Island seemed the best idea. Divers discovered a piece of an old transatlantic cable off the island. This cable was pulled up by a spool; a second large spool with the new pipeline was constructed. The pipe and the cable were lassoed together and fed back into the ocean. It was a one-day operation, but it required many months of research and planning."

At last electricity was brought in and a private sewer system installed, and the time had come for dealing with the in-

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"Our primary goal was to respect the essential simplicity and purity of the lighthouse," explains Fabiola Martens (far left, with her husband).

LEFT: "We transformed a small, dilapidated mudroom into a more useful entrance. Window seats were installed to provide extra storage space."

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terior of the keeper's house. As all the structures on the property were considered landmarks, even the smallest decisions regarding their renovation had to be submitted to the National Park Service. Thus it was not until 1992 that the couple could move in. "There were times when I couldn't see the end of the tunnel," says Martens, "but I was young and in love and admired Martin so much that I thought he knew what he was doing."

The interior architecture remained largely intact, though the wall dividing two parlors was removed, a kitchen wall was taken out, a bedroom was transformed into a bath and the floors were redone. After endless months were spent scraping off the old paint by hand, the walls were ready to be painted. Instead of working with the quiet colors that Martens had seen in summer cottages in Maine, she used strong primary colors that reminded her of Europe. The dining room and master bedroom walls became a vibrant yellow; the rest of the rooms were painted a stark white. For the outside trim, a blue with a purple undertone was chosen; the color was inspired by the blue that a French artist Martens liked had used in his canvases.

The couple decided to keep the paintings in the house to a minimum, as the views from every window are ever-changing paintings in themselves. The furniture consists of pleasant, comfortable pieces picked up in Mount Desert and Philadelphia antiques shops. The floors are covered in colorful old kilims bought on a trip to Turkey thirteen years ago.

The toolshed/outhouse has been converted into a guesthouse—the bedroom is in the loft, and a sitting room and kitchen are on the first floor. As for the grounds, no attempt has been made at a formal garden; instead, wildflowers have been sown everywhere. One leaves the meadow to traverse a steep path leading down seventy steps to the beach.

"Despite its location on a rocky island, our house isn't cold or remote," says Fabiola Martens. "Although this is more of a getaway for us, a place to enjoy peace and quiet, we wanted our home to be bright and colorful. But not *cute*. That was to be avoided at all costs. Simplicity, not preciousness, was what we had in mind." □

