

Garden Design on an Island Paradise

By Amanda Walkins

It's another leisurely morning in paradise for Helen Murphy, as she strolls through the garden of her tropical-island home. She repots her plants and reorganizes her purple orchids. She has all the time in the world to spend, as she plants new seeds in her nursery and takes photos of the latest blooms to post online later. She meanders through the garden, savoring the sweet scents floating through the salt-air breeze, and she takes her time watering the hundreds of plants that surround her, stopping to pick the ripe bananas off the tree for breakfast.

This is the new life Helen has created for herself. She left the cold winters of North America behind many years ago. On the island of Roatán, in Honduras, she's found a place where the year-round warmth lets her enjoy the outdoors whenever she wants. Here she can indulge her love of gardening and turn it into a full-time living.

"I love working with nature," Helen says of her work on Roatán. "Planting from seeds is still exciting for me; waiting for that first leaf to emerge is still a thrill. Creating a garden in what was a construction site... giving an old, tired garden a facelift with some careful pruning and some fertilizer and maybe some new ground cover. I love having people stop me in the supermarket and tell me about how the fruit tree they bought from me three years ago has its first crop. Gardens bring joy in many ways, and I enjoy them all."

This green island getaway in the heart of the Caribbean is a far cry from the New York cityscape she once called home. "I grew up in Queens and then lived in Manhattan," she says. "In October 1986, after establishing myself as a highly sought-after landscape designer in the city, I needed a change. My business partner of many years and I had come to a point that it was best if we separated, mostly for personal reasons. So I headed to the Caribbean, to a series of islands nearly nobody had heard of back home."

Those islands were the Bay Islands of Honduras, offering some of the world's best scuba diving, thanks to a healthy coral reef teeming with colorful marine life. "I started off as a dive resort manager for 11 years on the islands," says Helen. "I didn't go back to landscaping and garden designs for a while. But settling full-time on the island of Roatán over the last decade has given me the opportunity to get back to what I did in New York."

After years of working at a variety of dive shops and resorts, Helen started doing more landscape projects on Roatán in 2003, while still being employed elsewhere. It wasn't until she left her last job in 2014 that she officially launched her own business as a full-time landscape designer.

"I have no regrets about moving here."

"I installed my nursery and began doing landscape projects on my own," she says. "Sometimes I go out and do a landscape installation. Sometimes I'll do a maintenance check. I also go to people's homes or business locations to give them a garden consultation. I trim trees, clear brush—whatever is needed as a service to people who love their gardens."

Helen first set off for the Bay Islands nearly 30 years ago, yet today Roatán is still off the radar for most North Americans. "My family thought I was crazy moving to some unknown place in Central America," she says.

But with two cruise ship ports and an international airport now bringing in tourists to the island, Roatán has seen steady growth that is predicted to continue for many years to come.

"By now, my family have all been to visit me on Roatán, so they understand," says Helen. "My cousin comes down two or three times a year. My mom, when she was



Roatán's warm climate can nourish a huge variety of plants, as Helen Murphy has found out.

alive, would spend three months here during the winter. She loved it here. I have hosted many friends and family that have arrived for the day on a cruise ship... island tours are my new specialty!"

Fortunately, Roatán's development hasn't brought high-rise condo buildings that block the ocean views. Instead, Roatán retains its Caribbean charm, with locally owned hotels and resorts integrating themselves into the tourism scene. Family-owned businesses abound, with large chain restaurants and stores left back on the mainland.

"I love the diversity of our community here," says Helen. "On any given day I can be with people from Honduras, Canada, the U.S., the U.K., Italy, Australia, Holland, wherever! When I was living in New York City, I was always amazed by the sheer diversity of the people there. Truthfully, it is just as diverse in Roatán."

And Helen never lacks for things to do.

"I love the diversity of activities here. We seem to have it all on Roatán. I enjoy anything that has to do with being on the water, so diving is still a favorite activity. I also enjoy snorkeling, fishing, sailing, and sometimes just standing in chest-high water on West Bay Beach, with a cold beverage, talking to friends. As the sun sets, I enjoy all the various venues on the island that provide good food and company.

"And I love live music! We are very lucky to have an exceptional group of very talented musicians who perform regularly here. Every March, I help organize a committee that brings them all together for an all-day music festival to raise funds for a local medical clinic, Clínica Esperanza.

"I can't imagine what my life would have been had I stayed in New York City, but I have no regrets about moving here and spending these last 30 years enjoying the natural beauty, climate, and the wonderful people of Roatán." ■

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Part-Time Income, Full-Time Adventure in Laos

By Sarah Aldrich

Here, people will ask you to take their picture and say 'thank you' when you're done," says Jonathan Look, 54, of his rewarding new life as a photographer in Laos. "It's fun to go out in the villages and meet the kids and the families and see how they live, take pictures of their lives... I love taking photos of Laos. It's just a beautiful place."

A lifelong traveler, Jonathan was feeling limited by his 40-hour-a-week job as an air traffic controller in Texas. "I never really got an opportunity to spend more than a couple of weeks away," he says. In 2011, Jonathan took an early retirement and sold everything he owned. Then he set out to find a place where he could indulge his lifelong passion for photography. And in the Laotian capital of Vientiane, a city of low costs and friendly locals, he has found just such a place.

Jonathan is a classic example of someone turning a passion into an income stream. He had a dark room as a teenager and took photos as a hobby for years. But he never took it seriously until he retired.

"You can be a great technical photographer," says Jonathan, "but unless you have something pretty to point the camera at, it's not going to be great."

So he's spent the last five years or so finding pretty things to point his camera at, traveling the world from home bases in Mexico, Cambodia, Thailand, and, most recently, Laos.

For now, Jonathan lives in Vientiane, Laos' sleepy capital city, which sits along the Mekong River. The lower cost of living, including a water bill of only \$3 a month and a budget of \$10 a month for talk and data on his iPhone, allows him to make money while pursuing the photography projects he enjoys—and only the projects he enjoys.

"If I want to do it, I will. If not, I'll help people find other photographers," he says. Jonathan takes photos of places he visits and sells them online through his personal website, *Lifepart2.com*.

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"In a lot of ways, it's an all-consuming passion. I do occasionally make money doing it, but I don't seek it out," he says. Jonathan lives comfortably off his pension and invests whatever money he makes from his photography into new equipment.

Jonathan decided to check out Vientiane as a home base when he heard that it was like Thailand 50 years ago. He and his partner Sarah Wilson, an English-language teacher from the U.K., were living in Chiang Mai but looking for something a bit more exotic, where they could move her dog and cat easily. They tested Vientiane out for a month and fell in love with the people.

As Jonathan explains, in some countries "they're more jaded by and used to tourists, whereas in most parts of Laos, tourism is still fairly new, and they do seem to really appreciate it."

Vientiane is in the north of Laos, directly across the Mekong River from Thailand. Golden Buddhist temples are interspersed amongst palm tree-lined drives and the wrought-iron gates and architectural touches of French colonialism. With a population of about 750,000,

"I love taking photos of Laos. It's just a beautiful place."



Vientiane's friendly locals and low costs have helped Jonathan Look feel right at home here.

Vientiane is still far from bustling and its center is quite walkable, with two main drags running parallel to the river and its accompanying river walk.

The couple recently landed their dream home on the Mekong, with a walled garden and sunset views. Their rent is \$1,000 a month. However, if you're willing to live only six miles out of town in a Lao-style home, you can get some acreage and pay as little as \$200 a month.

On top of Vientiane's low cost of living, Jonathan manages an affordable lifestyle by keeping his overhead low—no cable bill and lower gas bills, for instance. When he watches TV, he does it online. He pays about \$50 a month for internet. And he spends about \$20 a month on gasoline for his motorbike.

English is widely spoken here, and Jonathan found it easy to learn enough Lao to be polite. "If you just learn 'please' and 'thank you' and smile, people are generally appreciative and will go out of their way to help you," he says. "It's all about attitude."

Jonathan enjoys traveling around Asia inexpensively from the major hub of Bangkok. He heads across the border to Thailand and, after only an hour of travel, can get flights from a smaller airport into Bangkok for \$15. From there, he can get just about anywhere. He's traveled to Bali, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Malaysia. On occasion, he and Sarah head to Bangkok for the weekend to take advantage of its world-class shopping malls and movie theaters—though they can stay at home and see a newly released film at the brand-new theater in Vientiane for about \$2.50.

Jonathan is currently training for a marathon, so he often runs in the mornings before it gets hot, makes some coffee, checks up on the news, and eats his breakfast at home. He'll spend his morning taking or editing photographs. By noon he's done, and he usually meets Sarah for lunch.

For anyone else looking to embrace expat life, Jonathan says that you'll never have all the answers before you leave. Sometimes in life, you just need to take that step. But the rewards of doing so are well worth it.

"I found it intimidating at first," he says of the big decision to move abroad, "and now there's no place I can think of that intimidates me. I wish I'd known how easy it is to do. You don't have to know everything. It's easy. Just go." ■