

DESIGN | HOME TOURS

Antique Yellow Doors Convinced an L.A. Shop Owner to Escape to the Desert

It was the only detail that survived the renovation.

BY CHANTAL LAMERS



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"I'd been flirting with the desert for the past four or five years and slowly falling in love with it," recalls Denise Portmans, who co-owns the Santa Monica-based [Merchant Modern Shop and Gallery](#) with her daughter Sara Marlowe Hall. "I was drawn to the raw, vast landscapes, ever-changing palette, and quietness. But I was looking around and nothing spoke to me." The search seemed fruitless until one afternoon in the spring of 2019 when her phone buzzed. She answered and a familiar voice said, "I found your house."

A good friend of Portmans' had been road-tripping through the mountainous town of Morongo Valley, about 20 miles north of Joshua Tree, when she got lost and dead-ended into the rambling property. Portmans was immediately intrigued by the report: a 1950s Spanish-style ranch house tucked at the base of a mountain, bound by an offbeat mix of tumbleweed and eucalyptus trees. Then the text messages started rolling in with a handful of exterior images including a snap of a pair of derelict arched yellow doors. She knew her friend had got it right.

"It's the only thing I haven't actually touched," says Portmans, laughing, about the old doorway. "It's really rickety. A hundred people have told me to change it because I'm going to get robbed, but I just love it and I stubbornly won't replace it."



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Inspired by the home's Spanish and Moroccan cues and the adjacent desert hues, Portmans simply gave the plaster walls and concrete floors a fresh coat of white paint, leaving the raw wood beams untouched for contrast. "I worked with the bare bones that are here, because it didn't need all that much," she says.

The quiet retreat she cultivated mirrors her collected style: a mashup of rare Danish pieces with contemporary art and sculpture. The curated look is finished with textural vintage Moroccan blankets, baskets, and rugs. "I'm big on less is more, more is less: one beautiful chair, one beautiful sculpture. I don't think you need to fill a space with things," she notes.



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Rather than install obtrusive display shelves, she carved the occasional recessed nook into the deep plastered walls to display objects. The living room is anchored by a stove-top fireplace and an abstract piece by Hall. (Portmans has been going back and forth about adding a projector, but for now, the room is loaded with books and a record player.)



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The bedrooms are outfitted with low, Japanese-inspired handmade beds and dressed with layers of linens that Portmans sources from France. In the kitchen, handwoven baskets were turned into pendant shades, which cast incredible shadows, while the arched opening lends a communal vibe. Even the original doorways on the enclosed porch are covered with netting to retain the indoor-outdoor feel (also essential in the extremely dry climate). A pair of vintage finds, a 1980s Italian round ball travertine table and a Japanese wood deck chair, speak to the overall balance of warm and cool tones.

For Portmans, the desert is an escape from city life in Los Angeles, so creating space to capture the wilderness was also paramount. She designed stairs to a multitiered deck and dropped in a stock tank pool for dips on sweltering summer days. There are plans for a hot pool someday, too, but in the meantime, a concrete tub sheltered by a pergola and partially screened outdoor shower (each plumbed with hot water) are perfect for cooler days.

Portmans also offers the house as a [short-term rental](#), prized possessions and all. "The short version is, I think it's nice to share the way that you live with other people," says Portmans, who was influenced by the humble but well-curated vacation properties she stayed in during a visit to Cuba 10 years ago. "It stuck in my head," she says. "Now I open up my home, share it with people, and hope they understand and appreciate it."