



# A touch of class

An American upbringing, life with the Italian glitterati and a spell in Bangkok have all left their mark on actress-designer Debra Berger and her work, as she tells **Jenny Kean**

Above: Debra Berger works with other artists to create individual pieces of work like this fireplace at the Valdevaqueros hotel near Tarifa. Opposite: Clockwise from top left: Warm terracotta walls in the bedroom; Debra had the iron staircase made specially by a local artisan (detail bottom left); a trompe l'oeil mural by Bertrand Guillou in her apartment in Vejler





### The first time Debra Berger visited

Vejer de la Frontera, she drove into the maze of narrow streets and parked her car next to the Puerta Cerrada in the old Jewish quarter. "I stood outside what is now my house, looked up at the ancient archway and thought: 'I'd love to live here.' It took me two years to realise this was my house," she says with a laugh.

Her arrival in Vejer seven years ago was just one stop along a journey that had taken her far from her native America – including to an Italian renaissance castle where she lived with the renowned Prince Dado Ruspoli (the aristocrat who inspired Fellini's film *'La Dolce Vita'*), and to Bangkok where she gave birth to one of the two sons she had with Dado.

"I've been lucky enough to live in some beautiful places," says Debra, "but I immediately fell in love with Vejer. It is unique. I

love the worn streets that tell their own story, the food, the people, the music in the streets, the welcome that you get here. There's also a wonderful creativity, so much potential to build and to create. That's the Andalusian way, using the wealth of local materials. So although I lived in Italy for many years, I didn't find that same inspiration and creativity."

As an actress, potter and interior designer, creativity is important to Debra and she found a canvas for that artistic talent in her house in Vejer. Buying it was a long drawn-out affair as it belonged to many different people. "At one point, I had to find birth certificates for people who didn't know when they were born," she recalls.

The house was also a ruin, the walls rain-damaged and what is now the kitchen had a dirt floor and a trough for feeding animals.

"The challenge was to find the original

structure, to reveal the flow of the house."

Several years on, the result is a home that is in keeping with its traditional roots – sandwiched between the ancient town walls – and yet one that has its own unique imprint.

So Debra has kept the steeply pitched roof that was once typical of houses in Vejer but which have mostly been replaced in favour of flat roof terraces. She found a plasterer, Aurelio Jover, who gave the walls their irregular, rounded surface rather than the more uniform straight lines of today's workers. From gypsies in Marbella she picked up an old studded wooden door which fitted exactly the non-standard opening to her kitchen.

Yet overlying these traditional elements is a palette that is all her own. The bedroom walls glow with a terracotta wash; a honey-tinted archway frames a pair of turquoise painted doors; a set of 1920s coloured glass tiles







From left: Debra designed the metal door leading onto her terrace; One of her trademark mosaic and plaster fireplaces in the Punta Sur hotel; Debra and an example of her colourful ceramics



picked up in a flea market adorns the downstairs bathroom; and everywhere the soft colours and contours of her ceramics and decorations; "There are almost no straight lines in nature," she explains.

The staircase that curves across the top of the main sitting room is a good example both of Debra's thoughtful use of space and of her desire to work with other artisans and artists. She wanted to put in a mezzanine office but didn't want a supporting post to cut into the ground space beneath. She was fortunate to find Allan Angelo, a blacksmith who had brought his family from France to Spain in a horse and buggy. He came up with a system of medieval-style wall supports and the curling tendrils and leaves of the staircase now seem to grow up the wall of their own accord.

It was Allan who solved another problem too. Debra had suffered a break-in via her roof terrace, and friends told her she would simply have to install a security grille on the doorway leading from her bedroom to the terrace. Dismayed at the idea of bars across the sky, Debra sketched out an arched door with a curving design based on the medieval symbol of well-being. Allan turned the design into reality and also came up with an ingenious security latch. "I love that doorway now. It's a good example of a something that was a problem becoming a jewel," says Debra.

Perhaps it was this philosophy that inspired her trademark fireplaces, bedheads and wall decorations – curling plaster tendrils of lime and marble dust inlaid with mosaics. "I've always loved functional art," explains Debra. "It was after the big earthquake in Los Angeles where I was living at the time, and a lot of my pots had fallen off their shelves and been broken. I needed a fireplace so I used the broken shards to make a feature of it."

Since then, Debra has worked with other artists and designers on a number of hotels along the Costa de la Luz, including the Punta Sur and the Hurricane Hotel in Tarifa,

where she has just remodelled one of the bathrooms. The other outlet for her creativity is the clay from which she fashions huge pots and sculptural ceramics.

"I'm influenced by Dali and by Gaudi," she explains, "but also by the countries and civilisations I have come across. My father, William Berger, was a film actor so I spent time with him on location in Italy and in Egypt. When I was 15, I left home in Los Angeles and went to pick grapes in Sicily. From there, I hitchhiked through North Africa, and then back to France where I was offered the lead in Marcel Carné's film, *'The Marvellous Visit'*."

Debra ended up in Rome where she met and fell in love with her handsome prince and became part of the beautiful people immortalised by Fellini. She shows me a photo of her and Prince Dado taken by Jack Nicholson at Roman Polanski's house. She acknowledges the enormous influence of Dado and her time with him. "I think we complemented each other very well. His renaissance castle at Vignanello and the formal Italian gardens were so beautiful," she recalls. "It's all been a huge inspiration to me."

Debra still travels a lot – to Italy, to the States where her sons live, to London. "It's so important to step outside your own circle and open your eyes and ears to other places, other lives," she says. She is now selling the Vejer apartment she lived in until her new house was finished, and is looking to the future – more interior design work, she hopes, helping people to create living spaces "that are both creative and functional". And possibly community projects using natural elements and sustainability.

But she's not making any firm plans. "I think everything that's happened to me in my life has happened because I was open to it. Like coming to Vejer – I hadn't planned that, it just happened. Rather than seeing where and when, I know more what I'm looking for. It's a question of going with your inspiration."



## Address Book

### INTERIOR DESIGN

**Debra Berger** is happy to take on individual rooms or larger projects. See [debraberger.net](http://debraberger.net) or e-mail [debra@debraberger.net](mailto:debra@debraberger.net)

### HOUSE RENOVATION

- **José Manuel Sánchez Anel.** Tel: 956 451 605 or e-mail [jmsanel@hotmail.com](mailto:jmsanel@hotmail.com)
- **Aurelio Jover** lime plastering. Tel: 629 937 490 or 639 870 914

### IRONSMITH

**Allan Angelo.** Tel: 617 212 063

### ARTISTS

- **Sophie le Gros** painted the *trompe l'oeil* clouds mural in Debra's living room. Tel: 649 219 728. E-mail [lacubatilla@hotmail.com](mailto:lacubatilla@hotmail.com)
- **Tadeus Michalski** is a stone mosaic artist who worked with Debra on the windsurfing fireplace at Valdevasqueros. See [mozaiki-bez-granic.pl](http://mozaiki-bez-granic.pl) or e-mail [t.michalski@mozaiki-bez-granic.pl](mailto:t.michalski@mozaiki-bez-granic.pl)
- **Bertrand Guillou** created the *trompe l'oeil* mural in the apartment on Calle de la Fuente. Tel: 625 395 428 or e-mail [bertrandguillou@gmail.com](mailto:bertrandguillou@gmail.com)