



Piloting a straw-bale house

Heidi Porch flies
747s, but **home**
is where her
heart is

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Heidi Porch flies Boeing 747s to Tokyo for a living, drives a wine tour tram for Benziger when she's not in the air, and once parked a Cessna in the open Pacific a few hours shy of Hawaii.

But that's just work. Where Heidi lives is her life, in an innovative straw-bale home so comforting it's like a warm hug when she walks through her front door.

The door itself is old, wooden, and wonderful and when it opens Heidi sees a wall of windows framing a majestic view of Sugarloaf Mountain. That's just how Heidi planned it. She walked her five-acre property, wedged between Sonoma Mountain and the Mayacamas, until she found the exact scene she wanted to

welcome her home. Standing in a spot with the mountain straight ahead, she turned to her builder and said, "Put the door right here."

That's Heidi. She is warm, kind, and almost soft-spoken. Seeing her relaxed in her living room, it's a stretch to envision this fair, 5-foot 4-inch woman with fine, blondish hair at the controls of a massive jet, some 400 passengers' lives in her hands. But dig just a little and you hit bedrock, the inner Heidi, a master at being in control.

When she was a young woman, just starting out as a commercial pilot and delivering a Cessna plane from California to New Zealand, the engine seized and she was



Straw-bale walls allow numerous niches, including the traditional "truth window" that exposes the home's building material.





forced to ditch into the Pacific Ocean, 540 miles outside Honolulu. She knew to open the door before she ditched, got herself and a life raft out, stayed in the inflatable for nine hours in 30-foot seas, was scooped out of the water by a Russian freighter, then transferred to an American ship and brought to Pearl Harbor 28 hours after she crashed. She had only a bruise on her arm and a ceramic dish, a gift from the Cold War Russians, as evidence of her ordeal.

In the media blitz that followed, she answered many newscasters' questions, even appearing on *Good Morning America*, and was as gracious and unflappable as a public relations professional. In every interview she got in her personal message — "I will definitely fly again. I want to be a pilot for a commercial airline." She has now been flying for a major carrier for 24 years.

She's a woman who knows just where she wants her doorway, even though it does not face the street, as entries most always do. And she's not the type who frets about what faucet to choose. She has the unique, rustic-styled faucets she conjured in her imagination custom-made at Sonoma Forge to her specifications. Everything in her beautiful home is just how she destined it to be, and she loves it.

She bought the land in 1997 and wanted to eventually build a home with what she calls "an old California feeling." She was still living in Minnesota then, and when she visited Sonoma before her home was built she often stayed at the upstairs inn at Ramekins Culinary School. She greatly admired the rammed-earth construction of that building and decided that was what she wanted for her home. It turned out building with rammed earth was pricier than she expected. A little more research taught her straw-bale construction was more economical while giving her the earthy look she longed for. Heidi says straw bale costs about 20 percent more

The living room has a Rumford fireplace, designed to throw heat into the room.



than standard construction, but it's so environmentally efficient the expense can be made up by reduced energy bills over the long term.

It embarrasses Heidi to admit that environmental consciousness was not her motivator when she chose straw bale. She just liked how it looked. Once on board, though, she was quick to go green, using radiant floor heating and choosing recycled wooden doors from Mexico that she ordered from Sonoma Salsa. The floors are reclaimed heart pine that she was told was once the sub-floor in a Midwestern Sears, Roebuck warehouse.

It was the summer of 2001 when Heidi sold her Minnesota home, moved into a 30-foot trailer she parked on her property, and hired John Swearingen. Swearingen owns Skillful Builders and is a luminary in the straw-bale construction world. He



Doorways and window sills reveal the 35-inch-wide walls that provide superb insulation and interior silence.



“I like natural things. Wood. Glass.... I like simple.”

set up shop in an Airstream, and the neighbors began whispering about the funky settlement taking shape. Swearingen is a Buddhist, and he sponsored Tibetan workers, several of them monks, to come to Kenwood and build Heidi's house. When the prayer flags went up, the whispering grew louder but the karma was sublime.

Heidi had three concerns about straw-bale construction—fire, strength, and bugs—but learned all were unfounded. The bales are packed very densely and then covered with plaster so they're impervious to fire and extremely strong. “Burning the bales would be like trying to light a log with a match,” Heidi says, “The fire department loves this kind of construction.” There is also very little oxygen in the walls because they're so densely packed and plaster-sealed, which makes a very inhospitable environment for bugs. Besides, straw has so little nutrient value bugs don't like it much. As it was explained to Heidi, “You feed hay to the animals and you put straw on the barn floor.”

Her home is 2,300 square feet with two bedrooms, two baths, an office, and an expansive, open-walled space with kitchen, living and dining areas. Heidi loves to entertain, and this allows her to be with her guests when she's cooking. There is plenty of room for friends to gather around the large centrally placed island between the three rooms.

The perimeter of the house contains 540 bales of rice straw that weigh 65 pounds apiece, are about 35 inches wide, and are covered with two layers of plaster. Linseed oil is added to the plaster to protect it against moisture. The interior walls are standard wooden stick framing.

Heidi's open-walled kitchen allows her to cook while visiting with guests.



A wine closet holds 30 cases in temperature-controlled, wood-framed style.

The straw bales create an almost silent interior space and allow for interesting niches and window depths that are not possible with standard framing. Heidi went through the inside of the house with a can of spray paint, marking where she wanted niches cut in the straw. There is one on the side of the front door where she placed a kindergarten-style clay mold of her handprint. On the other side of the door is a straw-bale tradition called a “truth window”—a small wooden shrine with doors that open to reveal the straw inside the wall.

The living room has a Rumford fireplace, specially designed to throw heat into the room and surrounded with Connecticut blue stone. In the dining room there is an exquisite glass-doored wine closet with display racks built to hold 30 cases of wine. A longtime wine enthusiast, Heidi became friendly with the folks at Imagery Estate winery when she went there to pick up her wine club shipments. They thought she would be perfect in the tasting room and offered her a part-time job. After a couple of years at Imagery they asked her to do the

tram tours at the Benziger family’s flagship winery.

“I guess they figured if I could fly a 747 I ought to be able to drive a tractor,” she laughs, and goes on to rave about the Benzigers and their commitment to biodynamics. “They are so passionate about what they do there it’s infectious.”

Their passion appeals to her because she is equally intense about everything she does. Whether the subject is flying, wine-tasting, or her home, Heidi’s words come directly from the heart, and you sense that if she doesn’t really feel it she won’t bother to say it.

“I like natural things. Wood. Glass. I don’t like clutter and I don’t like too much color because you can get tired of colors. I like simple,” Heidi says. She describes herself as a spiritual person who doesn’t practice any particular religion. Experience the peace in her home, her calm demeanor, and her strong sense of who she is, and you quickly conclude the monks really did work their magic.

The straw bales encompass her. She lives in the moment. **S**