

Florida Living PEOPLE & PLACES™

River Escape

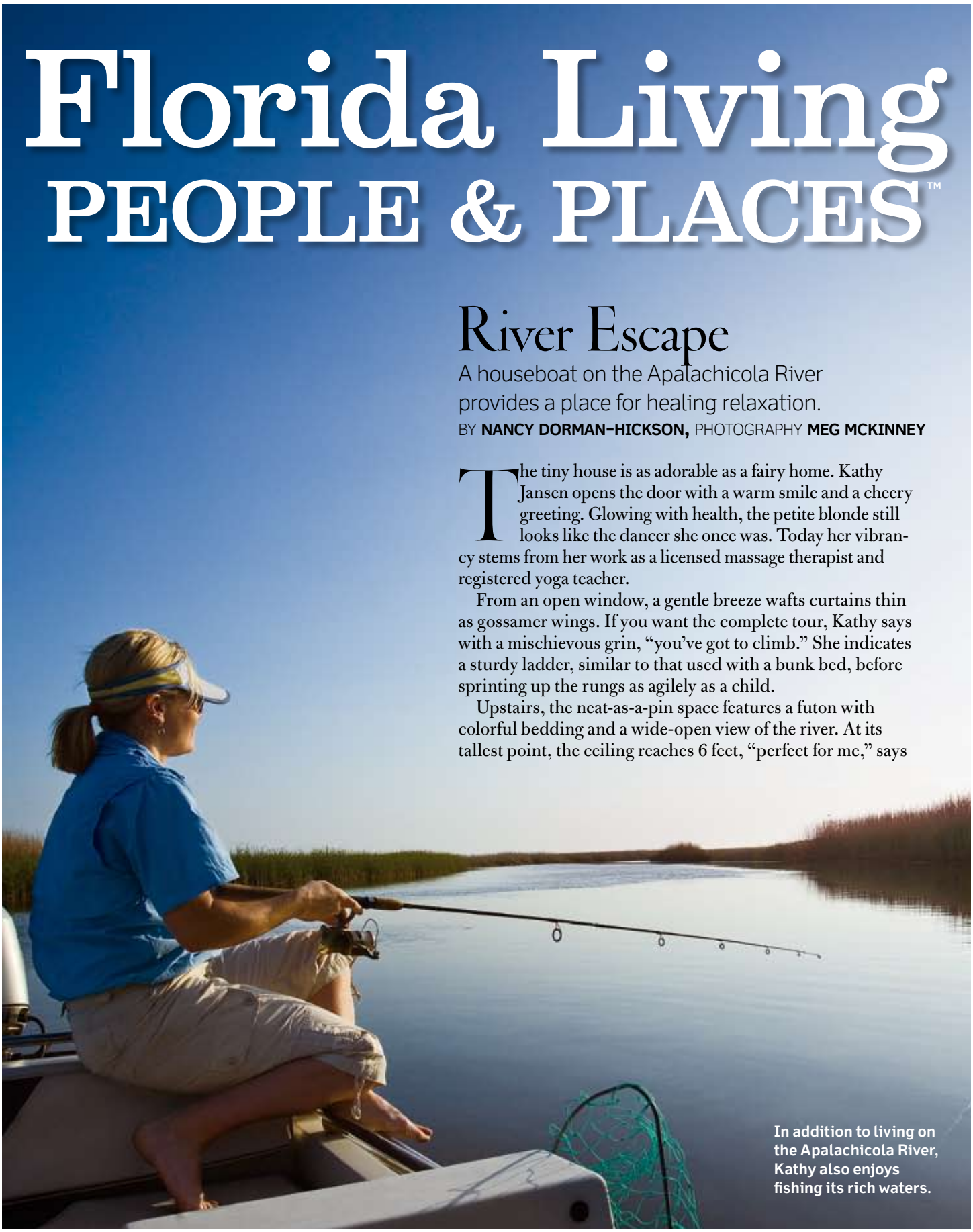
A houseboat on the Apalachicola River provides a place for healing relaxation.

BY **NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON**, PHOTOGRAPHY **MEG MCKINNEY**

The tiny house is as adorable as a fairy home. Kathy Jansen opens the door with a warm smile and a cheery greeting. Glowing with health, the petite blonde still looks like the dancer she once was. Today her vibrancy stems from her work as a licensed massage therapist and registered yoga teacher.

From an open window, a gentle breeze wafts curtains thin as gossamer wings. If you want the complete tour, Kathy says with a mischievous grin, “you’ve got to climb.” She indicates a sturdy ladder, similar to that used with a bunk bed, before sprinting up the rungs as agilely as a child.

Upstairs, the neat-as-a-pin space features a futon with colorful bedding and a wide-open view of the river. At its tallest point, the ceiling reaches 6 feet, “perfect for me,” says

A woman with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt, light-colored shorts, and a visor, is sitting on the edge of a houseboat. She is holding a fishing rod and looking out over a wide, calm river. The background shows a line of trees and a clear sky. The houseboat is white and has a green net visible in the foreground.

In addition to living on the Apalachicola River, Kathy also enjoys fishing its rich waters.

RIGHT: Kathy practices yoga with other residents of Apalachicola.

FAR RIGHT: “I felt that people might really get into it being on a houseboat,” says Kathy about her massage business. “It seems to fit, you know?”



Kathy, who stands 5'3" tall. Suddenly, the room gently sways and a wood-against-wood sound comes from outside. “That’s the wind shifting,” Kathy explains. “We’re floating on pontoons.” The houseboat rests in a slip found on Water Street alongside more conventional boats.

Finding Florida Welcome to Riverfront Therapy Inc. and *Spirit of the River Spa*, a houseboat where Kathy operates her massage and healing-arts business on the Apalachicola River.

Born in California and raised in Minnesota, Kathy first came to Florida after her mother died and her father relocated the family to Gainesville. She finished high school there and then earned her bachelor in theater arts and dance performance at the University of South Florida in Tampa. From ages 18 to 28, Kathy worked professionally in dance and theater. “I was in Atlanta when my dad called me in 1997 and said, ‘We bought a restaurant. Do you want to come and help us out?’” Kathy recalls.

The restaurant was on St. George Island, near Apalachicola. When asked about her first encounter with the area, Kathy admits, “I didn’t care for it much. I was used to cities.” After a year, she left for New York City to pursue her career.

The move proved disastrous. Plans to room with friends fell through and left her, as she says, “homeless and surfing couches.” The relentless concrete jungle had Kathy longing for even a glimpse of the great outdoors. So when she returned to the Apalachicola area, its quiet charm and abundant access to Mother Nature suddenly held a strong appeal.

She also realized it was time to pursue a different career. “I decided to go to massage therapy school while I was helping my father with the restaurant,” she recalls. She worked at the restaurant seven days a week. Three nights a week, she commuted 160 miles round-trip to Tallahassee to attend the CORE Institute. “I didn’t sleep much,” she says, “but it was worth it.”

Houseboat Haven When Kathy graduated in 2000, she did massage house calls at first. “I started renovating the houseboat and paying for it as I went along,” she says. She did much of the



work herself, along with help from her dad and friends. “I finished it in 2003,” she says. “It was just a shell. I basically gutted the interior and rebuilt it.”

Kathy finds the houseboat is a great way to attract people. “There is some kind of energy here,” she says of the river. “A lot of people talk about how, when they come to the water, it somehow takes the weight of the world off of their shoulders. Here, you’re pretty much in nature the whole time. You might witness loons, sea otters, dolphins, manatees, alligators, eagles, and all manner of seabirds.” Clients can also take a turn on the river in her kayaks and just enjoy the peaceful sanctuary. “Add a great massage to that, and they are just beaming when they walk out the door,” she says.

“I’ve always done things a little differently,” muses Kathy with a shrug. “Dance and theater are about you,” she continues. “You’re the product. You’re selling yourself. But with massage therapy, I feel like I give to the world. I give people an opportunity to live better, longer.” ●

RIVERFRONT THERAPY INC. AND *SPIRIT OF THE RIVER SPA*: 313 Water Street, Slip B-5, Apalachicola, FL 32320. Visit www.riverfronttherapy.com, call (850) 653-6719, or e-mail kjhealingarts@yahoo.com.