



Holiday home sweet holiday home: Bettina von Hase outside her holiday home in West Palm Beach. Photograph: Priscilla Rattazzi

# Sunshine state of mind

When her health and relationship took a battering, Bettina von Hase prescribed herself the perfect remedy – a holiday home in Florida

I am the sort of person who always imagines a life in a place I like. In my mind, I have owned villas in Tuscany, hideaways in the Hamptons, colonial houses in Guadalajara, adobe structures in Santa Fe and beach huts just about everywhere I've ever been near water, particularly in the Caribbean. Living in London, with its grey skies and lack of defined seasons, my ideal for a holiday getaway is a place with guaranteed sunshine. Throughout my life I have longed for a bolthole where I can relax, a place I can go to without having to fit in around others. After a lifetime of holidaying with family and friends who, unlike me, have been mostly married with children, I have dreamt of finding something permanent that I can call my own.

The opportunity to fulfil the dream presented itself quite inauspiciously when one of my closest friends, the photographer Priscilla Rattazzi, invited me to stay with her in Florida. My annual sojourn in Mexico had been scuppered by the credit crunch, and Priscilla had recently become a "snowbird" –

the Florida nickname for northerners who fly south for the winter months. I knew that Priscilla (an Italian aesthete living in New York) would never have bought anything, or spent time anywhere, if it didn't merit at least some attention. But even I had been alarmed at her choice of a destination like Palm Beach, where the average age is 85 and ladies promenade on Worth Avenue in Lilly Pulitzer pants. But then again, I was curious. "Come for a few days," she said on the phone. "You'll be surprised by Florida. Everyone thinks it's boring, but it's not. And there's a house for sale in West Palm Beach that would

wanted to sell. As I looked up at the dainty blush-coloured construction, my first reaction was "how sweet". But the moment the doors opened, I fell in love. Having been keen to meet Casa Blanca's celebrity owner, Alexandra (her blog, "The Bag Lady Papers", had made for entertaining reading on *The Daily Beast*), I now barely noticed her. Instead, I experienced a *coup de foudre* – the kind, I might add, I've never felt for a man. I knew instantly that this house was incontrovertibly right. At first, I thought it was the large white drawing room that seduced me. It had a pitched roof from which an old-fashioned fan blew a gentle >

be perfect for you," she added intriguingly. Three weeks later we pulled up in front of the improbably named Casa Blanca, a one-storey Forties cottage tucked away down a quiet street off South Dixie Highway. It belonged to a writer, Alexandra Penney, who lost her nest egg in the Madoff scandal and

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breeze. The whole house was painted white inside, all 1,200 sq ft of it – two bedrooms, one bathroom, a large kitchen and a Florida room (a kind of conservatory, with double doors that led into the garden). The play of light on the white walls and simple white furniture lent a calm and joyful air to the interior, with wainscoting on the walls, a stone fireplace, and harmonious proportions throughout.

Casa Blanca was that rare thing, a high-ceilinged cottage, with quite a bit of land described as having “yard potential”. Wherever I looked out of a window, I could see green – from the lawn, both front and back, through the different palm trees, to the tall hedge. The palm being a favourite tree, here there were masses; the majestic royal palm, with its immense grey stem, the smaller bottle palm, with its bottle-shaped trunk, and the foxtail palm. Never having owned a garden, I became quite giddy at the thought of planting delicious-scented gardenia and Confederate jasmine, two of the many plants that thrive in a subtropical climate like Florida’s.

I was seduced also by the atmosphere of the house, which resonated with a sort of literary and artistic romanticism. The environment created by Alexandra and her partner, a painter, made it easy for me to skate over some of the house’s finer details. They alerted me to the rickety boiler and washer-dryer, but my mind was racing. All I could think about was how to secure this house, to make sure that this piece of good fortune would not evaporate. Back in London, on my everyday terrain, I decided the house would be a reward for three arduous years during which my life as I had known it had come to an end. I had been diagnosed with breast cancer twice, and had spent the best part of one year trying to recover from the debilitating treatment. I had parted from a boyfriend in the aftermath, which had caused me terrible heartache and the painful return to being single in an altered set of circumstances. And to top it all, I had finally said goodbye to my dreams of having a child of my own. I had also changed physically. Losing my long hair to chemotherapy had turned me into a different creature.

In short, I had had to shed my skin, and with that came a desire to mark the beginning of a new chapter. I had never considered my age other than in an increasingly finite way where procreation was concerned. Without having children of my own, I was not aware of my age in the same way as friends whose growing offspring were constant reminders of their own mortality. My reminder had come in a different, shocking, direct way, in a doctor’s

consulting room. For the first time, I was living for the now. I felt – and feel again – young of spirit. Turning 50 had been a gift. What for other women might have been a melancholy step, had been for me a miraculous rebirth. My returning energy encouraged me to take on new challenges. Not having a boyfriend’s interests at heart, I felt free to make major decisions. Not wanting to always fall in with other people’s plans and their children, I thought how enriching it would be to play host. During my recovery, I had made a checklist of the goals I still wanted to achieve (well, the ones I admit to in print). Number one on my list was a beach house, yet I had never looked for one. I suppose I had hoped that something would just “turn up”. And so it had. I tried out the idea of Casa Blanca on several friends. I could not have suggested anything worse. “Florida?” they said. “You’re mad. It’s a nine-hour flight from London. You’re not old enough yet. You are giving up. Do you know that they have hurricanes/

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sharks/racoons/alligators/pythons/termites/alcoholics/retirees? What are you *thinking*?”

One of my four brothers-in-law took to calling me late at night, adopting the breezy, sensible tone of voice a doctor might use with a deranged patient: “Betty. I’ve been thinking... why don’t you try to rent first? You don’t have to buy right away. My piano teacher lived in Florida, and her house nearly got deluged by a hurricane, and got eaten by termites.”

But I didn’t want to rent. I wanted to buy and commit, goddammit. I wanted to start having guests rather than being one.

I exchanged contracts at Easter last year, and completed that July. When I picked up my plastic leopard-print keys from the Corcoran Real Estate Corporation, I couldn’t quite believe my luck. But I also felt a little fearful – this was the hard bit. I drove to the beach and sat on the sand studying the waves. It was typical July heat, over 100 degrees, but the fresh sea breeze cooled my brow and steadied my nerves. I felt let loose, like someone who has escaped from another life – and, in a sense, part of me had. Buying the house was not *it*. Now I had to make it liveable. The first thing I did was hang Priscilla’s housewarming gift,

one of her large photographic works, over the sofa. I spent hours driving to gigantic malls to find equipment for the house: mattresses, hoovers, crockery and linen. Signing up to services such as the phone, internet and television required the patience of a saint and a PhD in people management. Meanwhile, bills were piling up, largely because I was propelled into the new homeowner’s nightmare of everything going wrong.

On my second night, I woke up terrified by a noise that sounded as if large animals were fighting under the floorboards. To my horror, I discovered rats were chewing up the ancient sewerage pipes, which meant hiring an army of construction workers to crawl under my house. Old wires failed to work; doors did not close properly; the washer-dryer was a fossil from a bygone age. “Welcome to Florida,” my architect friend Champion Platt announced as he drew up ingenious plans for my house.

After fixing essentials, and going on a buying spree along America’s most famous street of antiques shops, South Dixie Highway, the house finally looked good enough to welcome my sister Angelica and her husband Nick for a holiday in January this year. This was the big test, the first time that family could check out my place in the sun. Knowing they would tell me their views, and report back to other family and friends, the fun of being a good host dissipated and I was filled instead with an anxiety I likened to that of a good housewife (something I have never been): would the mattress be hard enough, the martinis cold enough, the food hot enough, the blinds dark enough, the shops hip enough, the weather warm enough? In fact, it wasn’t all that warm; an uncharacteristic chill had settled over Florida for the winter.

Angelica and Nick understood straight away. They loved the weather, the palm trees and the beach; we ate at Howley’s, the local Fifties diner; we shopped at the Palm Beach Vintage clothes store, and in the thrift stores on Dixie; we went for walks on the palm-lined avenue overlooking the causeway; we were wine and dined by my friends. No more worries about alligators, sharks, rats, raccoons and termites; the little house beamed, and that particular Floridian light bathed everything in a golden hue.

I am currently at my desk in west London, and it’s raining outside. I look at the grey sky, sliced by a plane flying across my window. Here one minute, gone the next. I wish I was a passenger in it, because I have somewhere new to go to, somewhere sunny and warm. Best of all, it is somewhere all of my own. ■

