



Laid-back Luxury

By Linda Marx, Special to the Daily News

Palm Beach Daily News - July 2003

Island Getaway

A few weeks later I traveled south to Islamorada, an island town between Miami and Key West in the Florida Keys. I was pleasantly surprised to find Casa Morada, a renovated all-suites hotel that reopened last August

While the Clinton Hotel is designed like a sophisticated island in the city, Casa Morada is a laid-back resort on an island. Using Miami/Manhattan style and minimalist decor, three female entrepreneurs have changed the face of hospitality in Islamorada, the small island village known more for its mom-and-pop motels than boutique décor.

Owners Heidi Praver, general manger and vice president of operations; Terry Ford, president; and Lauren Abrams, vice president of marketing - alumni of Ian Schrager Hotels -plunked down \$3 million to buy the aging motel.

They spent more than \$1 million to refurbish Casa Morada into 16 elegant suites, some with whirlpools on the terrace, others with day beds on the porch overlooking Florida Bay. Each suite offers a private garden or terrace.

In this island town, dubbed the "Sport Fishing Capital of the World," the trio envisioned a laid-back, boutique hotel that would combine luxury with serenity and style. They aim to attract travelers who prefer a shorter jaunt than the extra 90 miles it takes to drive to Key West.

The barefoot beauty of the 1.7-acre bayfront property draws people by car or boat - dockage is available to all guests. Pets are welcome, and the hotel offers them perks, from dog beds to personal dog tags.

The first thing I noticed after checking into the West Indies-style outdoor reception area overlooking the bay was the vast, natural landscaping.

Originally built in the 1950's, the owners hired Key West landscaper Raymond Jungles to create an island paradise of native vegetation, including Florida silver, South American oil and Fiji Island palms, plus clusters of pigeon plum, beach creeper, Fakahatchee grass and Easter Parade bougainvillea. A grotto of carved limestone is an oasis in this green.

After a walk across a bridge to the docks, by the freshwater swimming pool and through a cabana and water-splashed gazebo where drinks are served at sunset, I wandered back through pristine landscape to my second-floor suite, aptly called The Jungle.

The three-room digs with terrazzo floors holds an eclectic mix-and-match of Mexican antiques with a modern bathroom featuring beauty products and a hair dryer. The entry/living room area has an island-theme daybed with black-and-white photos of native vegetation.

The all-white bedroom is dominated by a sweeping view of the property and bay through the floor-to-ceiling window/door leading to the terrace. The king-size bed with a thick white comforter and cotton duvet is across from a large rope-anchored mirror.

Other amenities include a well-stocked mini-fridge, cable TV and DVD/CD player and safe. Movies are available at the reception desk; books are stacked in a wood-framed case next to the bed.

I spent much of my time on the indoor/outdoor terrace. A large whirlpool allowed me to soak and gaze at the bay. There was an aroma-therapy candle and small high-tech ceiling lights to enhance the mood.

Complimentary breakfast

Complimentary breakfast, served on the Seaview Terrace, is a pleasant experience. Under a canopy, café tables and a longer wood table are arranged so guests can help themselves to cereals, croissants, muffins, orange juice, tea and coffee.

All meals can be ordered privately through the reception desk to be brought to your room or favorite outdoor table. A new arrangement with an Islamorada caterer offers guests fancy dinner choices. The staff can set up elegant dining on suite terraces, outdoors under the stars or in a romantic gazebo.

Another dining option is the Florida-Asian cuisine at Kaiyo, 81701 Old Highway. Just a two-minute car ride away, this romantic sushi bar and full-service restaurant makes to order all kinds of sushi, sashimi and other seafood (try the striped bass), chicken breast or salads. Homemade ice creams are best enjoyed before French-pressed coffee.

Recreation on land and sea

You may want to do nothing at Casa Morada but rest and read. But there are diversions, such as bocce ball, bicycling, snorkeling, diving, fishing and a sunset sail available from the dock.

Depending on your mood, time frame and interests, Casa Morada can fill most of you getaway needs.

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