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Easy, Breezy Beach House

Rubell Hotels' new property in Bal Harbour skewers old notions of Florida hospitality and transports the feel of a Hamptons summer house to within minutes of Miami's South Beach.





THINK ABOUT THE crisp white sails, clear blue sky, and indulgent luxury that are synonymous with summer in New York's Hamptons and you'll be in the right frame of mind to experience Rubell Hotels' nine-month-old Beach House Bal Harbour.

Jennifer Rubell, co-owner of the 170-room hotel, and erstwhile Polo Ralph Lauren interior designer Scott Sanders had no hesitation about transplanting a New England resort idiom to a 50-year-old beachfront gem just minutes away from the Art Deco chic and Florida funk of Miami's South Beach. "We wanted to recreate the feel of a summer house in the Hamptons—decorated but not oppressive, low-key and comfortable, yet lux-

urious. We had no issues with authenticity. Miami is not Nantucket any more than this hotel is a house. Hotels are about fantasy," says Rubell, who regularly summers in the Hamptons with her family.

The starting point for this multi-million-dollar transformation was finding a workable look for the five floors of guestrooms. Sanders, a residential designer who had never before attempted a hotel, was challenged to find a concept that worked for nine different room types. His solution was to make the views not only the focal point, but the design impetus. The blue and white colors of the views outside became the central palette for the experience within.

These rooms are overstuffed oases on a very residential scale. From the use of heavy combed cotton fabrics to the whitewashed wood wainscoting and the inclusion of details such as shelves and books, these guestrooms have not only the look but also the feel of a home away from home. "Everything is about comfort," says Sanders. "We didn't want →

Opposite: Restaurants such as the Atlantic, which plays off a theme of seashell-patterned blue fabric, are designed to create an intimate and home-like environment for dining.

Above: Guests who prefer to sink into the recesses of a soft leather couch seek out the subtle, Asian-inspired Bamboo Room.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL KLEINBERG



anything from a certain period, just a clean, crisp look." To make sure the look stayed clean and crisp, the design team selected residential fabrics but ran separate dye lots and heightened the durability.

Reinventing the anonymous public spaces of a 1950s hotel was another major hurdle for Sanders and architect John Hulka, who is also based in New York. It helped that the Rubells were willing to throw away all the boring, pretentious, by-the-book ideas of the grand old hotels. Along with those cast-off notions went any thought of a large, traditional lobby and a dramatic entry sequence. Instead, the architects and designers scaled down the public space into a series of intimate home-like environments. They include the Screened-in Porch, with its antique wicker furnishings; the Bamboo Room, a mix of Ralph Lauren leather couches and Japanese accents; the Seahorse Bar, part intimate private den, part sexy night spot; and the Atlantic restaurant, which plays off the central theme of seashell-patterned blue fabric.

"I didn't want the public space to look as if I had 30,000 sq. ft. of space to fill and just wanted to get it over with. That's how you end up with lobby furniture that's all the same and carpeting that's all the same. I wanted to use the kind of attention to detail I would use in decorating someone's home," says Sanders, who thinks of these spaces as hidden treasures.

Creating a truly residential experience in the public spaces led Sanders not only through the familiar resources of Polo Ralph Lauren's home collection but, along with Rubell, through a cramped antique store basement in Marblehead, Maine, where they found the right wicker pieces. Back in Miami, they went to competitive hotels, bars, and restaurants to find what worked and what did not. Although Rubell believes in





weighing functionality against individuality, she has a different definition of "functional" than most hoteliers.

"It would have been easier to order everything out of a catalogue," says Rubell. "One of the antique wicker couches has already collapsed under the weight of heavy hotel usage. It took a lot of time to find a replacement. Would it have been easier and more efficient to just buy a new one? Yes. Is that what we wanted? No. It's just part of the price you pay in creating a special place."

—Mary Scoviak

Opposite, above: "We wanted to bring back a touch of true Florida to Miami without sacrificing the overall New England feel of the hotel," says interior designer Scott Sanders. The solution: a fresh blue and white color scheme and the summery feel of cotton fabrics.

Opposite, below: Architect John Hulka and interior designer Scott Sanders scaled down an unassuming lobby into four different design experiences more in keeping with the feel of a spacious, elegant New England summer home.

Above: The Screened-in Porch, furnished with turn-of-the-century wicker antiques, won't be confused with any other lobby area in South Beach.