

The New York Times

An Invitation to Paradise, But What if Everyone Says 'Yes'?

Published: April 11, 2004

INDIA HICKS set out for a fancy night on the town on Harbour Island earlier this month dressed in exotic brocade, with nothing on her feet but a walnut-colored tan and a generous coat of nail polish. Ms. Hicks, a model, the product of proper British boarding schools, with a strain of blue blood, likes to go barefoot even to dinner.

"I almost never wear shoes," she said in the Chinese-red dining room of the Landing, the 200-year-old bay-front hotel, which she helped to renovate. Neither does her companion, David Flint Wood, a former ad man, nor their three towheaded boys. "When we go to London we have to forage for sneakers that they can wear," Ms. Hicks said, but otherwise footwear is not a concern. "After all, it's been months since the boys left the island."

Eight years ago, Ms. Hicks, 36, a daughter of the legendary decorator David Hicks and the granddaughter of Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, put down roots on this three-mile-long Bahamian fishing island. To hear her tell it, her mission since then has been to preserve the island's character as a rustic, slightly drowsy retreat, infiltrated now and then by chicly laid-back tourists.

But if she is trying to keep it a secret, she is doing a miserable job. "India is the undeclared spokesman of Harbour Island," said Clemens von Merveldt, who runs Pink Sands, an exclusive resort here created by Chris Blackwell, the music impresario turned hotel developer.

To promote "Island Life," a coffee table decorating book Ms. Hicks produced with Mr. Flint Wood – a vision of Harbour Island out of Maugham or Graham Greene, with mosquito netting, tiled floors and ceiling fans – she was feted last month at parties at Ralph Lauren shops in New York, Palm Beach and Los Angeles. On CNN, Larry King checked her connection to Prince Charles (they are cousins).

Ms. Hicks posed with Mr. Flint Wood on the veranda of their 1950's plantation-style house for the cover of a J. Crew catalog, available in June, and she has discussed her island life in glossy magazines in England and the United States. The result has been a flurry of publicity that has some people calling Harbour Island the next St. Bart's, that once serenely chic resort that has become a brassy hot spot.

She insists that seeing Harbour Island become a place like St. Bart's – where "every street has bars, fancy stars, megahouses and a Gucci," in her words – is the last thing she wants. "I feel quite protective of the place," she said, adding testily, "We really don't need more publicity."

But some islanders bristle at all the attention Ms. Hicks has directed their way. Robert Arthur, a real estate agent and an owner of Arthur's Bakery, a favorite local spot, chided, "There's one side of India, she'll say she doesn't want to advertise, and another blurting out the name of the island all over the BBC."

In truth, Harbour Island remains a long way from other overrun Caribbean resorts. A sliver of rock off Eleuthera that is reachable only by water taxi, the island has no golf courses, no gambling and no rowdy nightclubs. There are only a handful of luxury hotels and just a scattering of restaurants and shops – among them one run by Ms. Hicks with Tracy Barry, the majority owner of the Landing (Ms. Hicks has a 25 percent share). Situated behind the hotel, the shop is well stocked with lacy undies designed by Elle Macpherson, the model, and caftans by Allegra Hicks, Ms. Hicks's sister-in-law.

Starting about 10 years ago, Harbour Island became a magnet for the likes of Ms. Macpherson; Diane Von Furstenberg and Barry Diller; Robert Miller, the duty-free mogul; and Millard Drexler, the former chief executive of Gap, who now runs J. Crew – all of whom have purchased houses on the island.

“The island is getting very hot,” said Hugh Stockton, the president of Island Trading, the developer of Pink Sands. “It’s never going to be St. Bart’s,” he predicted. “To me what really is happening is that this is becoming like a Martha’s Vineyard or Nantucket,” attracting well-heeled visitors from the United States and abroad, eager to sample Harbour Island’s rustic charms.

Vanessa von Bismarck, a Manhattan fashion publicist who paid her first visit last month, staying at a guest-house on Ms. Hicks’s property, is typical of many newcomers. “I wanted to check out Harbour Island because St. Bart’s is becoming unbearable, at least during high season,” she said.

It is Ms. Hicks, some say, who must share the praise or blame for the island’s spike in popularity. “Island Life: Inspirational Interiors” (Stewart, Tabori & Chang), which Ms. Hicks first promoted on a tour of England when the book appeared there last fall, is full of pictures of Hibiscus Hill, her home, and the adjacent two-story guesthouse built by Ms. Hicks and Mr. Flint Wood, as well as of the Landing. Her home is shown as a perfectly stage-managed setting, attuned to the rhythms and colors of life on the island with its fishing boats and rows of pink, white and green clapboard houses that front narrow roads where golf carts vie with guinea hens for the right of way.

On a recent Friday, just before her guests were to arrive for the busy Easter season, Ms. Hicks ushered a visitor through her home. No quarter was off-limits, with Ms. Hicks acting as a cheerily vocal guide through the whitewashed nursery; the pink-tiled bedroom with its mahogany-stained four-poster; and the kitchen, where Jenga, a macaw, is permitted to roam freely over the table, nibbling savories.

Direct and a bit self-mocking, Ms. Hicks does not even try to hide a streak of snobbery. There was a glint in her eye as she sat on an oversize sofa, reminiscing about guests at the Ralph Lauren book party in New York. (Mr. Lauren, who discovered Ms. Hicks in the early 80’s, has featured her in two recent fragrance campaigns.)

“There were all these ridiculous girls, wearing tiaras, these tinselly little things,” she recalled, wiggling her forefingers over her head. “You just knew they had never seen a real tiara in their lives.”

“Of course I have never worn a tiara,” she added, almost boastfully. “I’m not married, you know – I can’t.”

She fielded questions about her lineage with a gracious aplomb. As Prince Charles’s cousin, she carried the bridal train at his wedding to Lady Diana Spencer. She is well aware that Americans find her ancestry somewhat more compelling than her modeling career.

“Obviously European nobility is something that Americans do find interesting,” Ms. Hicks said, adding that her pedigree has been a professional boon. “I don’t have Elle Macpherson’s legs, let’s put it like that.”

Ms. Hicks was preparing to give a fund-raiser last Wednesday at her home for the Dunmore School, a private school for Bahamian children and a handful of other year-round residents. Except that the event was a bit more than a local affair. “In the presence of Sarah, the Duchess of York,” the invitations read, “there will be an auction hosted by George Hamilton.”

Ms. Hicks said she had turned aside requests to cover the affair by ABC and Vanity Fair. Nor was The New York Times invited. “My guests would feel uncomfortable with a reporter in their midst,” she said.

That explanation gave some island residents, a chuckle. "Anyone can come to the party if they pay for a ticket," scoffed Nancy von Merveldt, who is a co-manager with her husband of the Pink Sands. "Or perhaps you have to be invited to pay for a ticket?"

Mr. Arthur, the bakery owner, said that before the advent of Ms. Hicks and her entourage, "this was a quiet little island," a place where visitors like Robin Williams, Geena Davis and Jimmy Buffett could stroll the streets unharassed. "But lately too much, too fast has brought a lot of influx of people, a lot of cars," he said. "It's all a bit much for a small place."

It seems a stretch to lay all such problems at Ms. Hicks's feet, or to trace to her and Mr. Flint Wood the lion's share of responsibility for the island's increasingly chic image and the traffic that has come with that. Harbour Island has been hospitable to fashion crews at least since the 1980's, when Bruce Weber began photographing there. During high season, from December through April, the hotels fill up with visitors of all kinds, including many families.

At the seven-room Landing, where a double without television or air-conditioning is \$250 in the high season, Ms. Hicks does not appear to be getting rich off her one-quarter ownership stake.

"Our aim was not to pull people," Ms. Hicks said. "You'll notice there is no mention of the name of the island in our book."

The couple, who decorated every inch of their house and the Landing, said they produced "Island Life" in the hope of securing future design commissions.

Still, for inveterate people watchers, some of Ms. Hicks's own guests are among the island's chief attractions. Her visitors during the feverish Easter holiday season included Anish Kapoor, the British sculptor, and, of course, Fergie, who was put up at Pink Sands. Other recent drop-ins have included Amy Sacco, the owner of the New York nightclub Bungalow 8.

Ms. Sacco found the island a soothing antidote to the frenzy of more populous resorts. "There's nothing like being on a beach with nobody else on it, nothing like that casual white linen you see everywhere, the wooden floorboards underfoot, that charm that's so untouched," Ms. Sacco said, then added an ominous caveat. "As with a lot of tropical paradises, once somebody finds out about something fabulous, then everybody goes."