

# Harmony on High

A Jamaican hilltop villa with a storied past gets a face-lift that preserves the best of its midcentury style

By Elizabeth Beeler Photographs by William Waldron

## PANORAMIC VIEW

A terrace that wraps around the living room pavilion affords sweeping vistas of Montego Bay. Vintage bamboo seating and a jute area rug (the perfect rug.com carries similar looks) add traditional island style.

STYLING BY ELIZABETH BEELER

Built in 1948 by an English actress and later purchased by musical writer and director Oscar Hammerstein, this British Colonial estate perched on a hilltop in Jamaica is shrouded in legends of enchanted evenings and elegant decor. The home, dubbed Highland House by its previous owners, has all the hallmarks of a classic Caribbean getaway: a series of open-air, pavilion-style rooms with soaring ceilings; a central pool and courtyard lined with bougainvillea and palms; and breathtaking vistas of Montego Bay and the Caribbean Sea. For years, it was the site of lavish parties frequented by Broadway and Hollywood A-listers, and some of Hammerstein's Broadway hits, including "The Sound of Music," are said to have been penned from the house's terrace. The best part for current owner Brenda Isaac, however, is that Hammerstein's wife, Dorothy, a sought-after New York decorator, spent decades covering the house with her impeccable taste. Nearly all of Dorothy's high-style flourishes, from vintage rattan furnishings and mahogany antiques to her collections of blue-and-white English china and monogrammed silver, remained at the house. "It's almost like it was frozen in time," says Brenda.

So she bought the home—and its contents—with plans to put her mark on its style. "I loved the history and wanted to keep Dorothy's spirit alive," says Brenda. "At the same time, the house begged for a fresh look." Despite its rich provenance, the property was a little run-down from neglect and in need of a face-lift. Besides, as smitten as Brenda was with the house's story, she did not want to feel as though she were living someone else's life in her home. So she began by injecting it with a dose of casual island flair.

**WHITE OUT**  
Nearly everything in the living room except a chintz-upholstered club chair was slip-covered or painted white—including the brass chandelier (seen reflected in the mirror, below). Opposite: Brenda had the monogrammed, tailored valances made locally. For a similar wall color, try Alabaster by Sherwin-Williams.





*“No island home is complete without stripes”*

In nearly every space, Brenda focused on one original element that served as her jumping-off point for the house’s new style. In the living room, that meant the gleaming white marble terrazzo floors. Playing off the cool, crisp surface, she painted the walls white and covered Dorothy’s chintz upholstered pieces with white twill slipcovers. Brenda coated the room’s brass chandelier in white paint and exchanged floral draperies for gauzy linen to lighten the look. For a contemporary edge, she painted the hip midcentury rattan white in a high-gloss finish and reupholstered the cushions with a graphic black-and-white print. A single club chair with its original chintz fabric is a throwback to the Hammerstein era.

For the dining room makeover, the inspiration was Dorothy’s china, from which Brenda borrowed a cerulean shade that she applied to nearly every surface. The once-dated yellow walls now feature wide blue-and-white stripes that recall a ‘60s-era beach cabana. “No island home is complete without stripes,” Brenda says. So as not to compete with the riveting striped walls, she painted the metal chandelier a toned-down version of the same hue. To avoid the predictable appearance of a matching dining set, Brenda interspersed locally crafted wooden chairs covered in crisp prints with Dorothy’s iron ones. She also paid homage to the house’s

**BLUE PLATE SPECIAL**  
 Cedar shingles cover the six steeply pitched roofs (above), the tallest of which soars 20 feet. Opposite: Sherwin-Williams’s Blue Plate is comparable to the shade Brenda used for the dining room’s stripes. China Seas carries similar prints to the upholstery on the wooden chairs.

history by adorning the walls with Dorothy’s china collection. “Her dishware is too wonderful to be tucked away somewhere,” Brenda says. Last but not least, she painted the room’s soaring mahogany ceiling white for a lighter look.

Not every room, however, received the same light and bright treatment. In one bedroom, Brenda preserved the original dark finish on the mahogany ceiling, as well as Dorothy’s bamboo-trimmed chintz valance and canopy, to maintain a romantic mood. Because the bedroom opens to the outdoors via louvered doors, Brenda added mosquito netting that provides protection from



**ANTIQUÉ CHIC**  
 The guest room (left) is one of the only spaces where the mahogany ceiling was not painted white. The bamboo-trimmed valance and canopy were designed by Dorothy; Quadrille carries a similar floral print. Below: Brenda rests on the original iron railing of the veranda that surrounds the living room pavilion (opposite). All of the outdoor furnishings are vintage mid-20th century pieces. Bamboo & Rattan and Circa Who, both in West Palm Beach, carry pieces with a similar style.

pests and also plays up the dreamy island vibe. Artwork is displayed in a gallery arrangement above an antique chest of drawers, along with a woven bedside lamp and a textured rug that reflect the juxtaposition of elegant and casual island style that Brenda wanted to achieve.

She took a similar approach to the outdoor living areas, most notably a veranda surrounding the living room pavilion. Although she kept most of the midcentury furnishings, she painted everything white and reupholstered the cushions in white weather-proof fabric. “I wanted to keep the focus on the colors found in the natural surroundings, like the bright flowers and lush greenery by the pool and the deep turquoise of the sea,” she says. Subtle accents, such as the orange striped pillows under the bougainvillea vine by the pool and the green striped pillows on the rattan pieces, pick up those vibrant hues.

Now, having spent more than a decade renovating and vacationing at Highland House, Brenda has fallen for Jamaica, too. “It’s a beautiful country filled with gentle, gracious people,” says Brenda. To give back to the community, she began donating produce from the property’s 3-acre organic garden to a nearby Jamaican school. Brenda envisions that one day she’ll become a full-time resident of the country that has stolen her heart. “I love the authenticity here,” she says. “Jamaica is truly the yin and yang of life.” 🌿



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Highland House is available for rent. For reservations or more info, call 805/258-2767, or e-mail [keressapage@yahoo.com](mailto:keressapage@yahoo.com).