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MANHATTAN TRIO BRINGS ART OF BOUTIQUE CHIC TO ISLAMORADA

CARA BUCKLEY, 'The Miami Herald' Staff

(March, 2003) The dog barked twice and she got the job. That's when Terry Ford knew she was in for a wild ride.

It was 1984 and two of Manhattan's most famous club men, Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell, decided to run hotels. Their Studio 54, though shuttered, had become legendary, and the Palladium club was in full swing. After Ford's interview for Morgans, the duo's first hotel, the hiring honcho asked his dog, sprawled nearby, what he thought.

The dog woofed and the die was cast. Ford went from housekeeper to general manager and later opened Schrager's Royalton hotel.

"It was the '80s, a lot of fun, a lot of wild times," says Ford, 46. "People were pretty excessive. Steve and Ian were characters. But brilliant."

Now, almost two decades later, with two other former Schrager disciples in tow, Ford is running the 16-room **Casa Morada** in Islamorada, using tricks of the trade learned from Schrager to inject boutique cool into the Florida Keys.

The three owners are all women, three blonde, blue-eyed Manhattanites still a little shell-shocked by the easygoing pace of the Keys.

"We're all type-A personalities from New York who can't relax," says Praver, **Casa Morada's** general manager and vice president of Stonehouse Resort Management, the hospitality company that runs the inn. "But we were very fortunate; the timing was great. People don't want to travel overseas, so they come to the Keys."

Ford and Praver met while working for Schrager and fast became friends. They left Schrager's fold in 1995 to start an Internet company and managed to escape before the techno bust. After Ford announced she'd had it with cold weather and was moving to Miami, Praver convinced her own husband to follow suit. Another ex-Schragerlet, Lauren Abrams, who marketed Morgans and the Royalton for 10 years, was also in Miami and keen on opening a hotel.

The three decided Miami Beach was oversaturated, scoured the Keys and opted for **Casa Morada**, happy with its plum spot halfway between Miami and Key West. They pooled their savings, drew funds from Abrams' father and Praver and Ford's respective husbands, and drew the remaining 60 percent of needed financing from TIB Bank of the Keys. They dropped \$3 million for the hotel last August, then spent several hundred thousand on renovations.

Modern furniture, crafted with clean, cool lines, replaced the hotel's dated, wrought iron, antique Mexican look. Chipped terrazzo floors were smoothed. Assorted verdant plants, mini man-made hilltops and a couple of sculptures went in. Six hundred and fifty tons of white

powder sand were wheeled, wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow, over a narrow bridge to the now beachlike pool.

The ladies say business has been brisk. When they took over last August, their occupancy sat at 55 percent, Abrams says, and has hovered between 70 percent and 80 percent since, with rooms fetching \$199 and up. Business comes from recommendations, media contacts and word of mouth. They suspect a wariness of overseas travel keeps things humming.

According to Robert Todak, former manager of Schrager's Delano and the Shore Club in South Beach, the women are connected to the teeth. Ford was revered as a "quintessential" Ian Schrager hotel manager, he said, and Abrams held as a marketing genius. Another industry watcher also forecast success.

"Younger professionals place a premium on privacy, and [Casa Morada's] just 90 minutes from Miami," says Mark Lunt, a hospitality analyst with Ernst & Young. "This property is very New York, and I think this type of concept is lacking in the Keys."

Expect no Studio 54 antics here, no rock-star wives riding about naked on horseback. But part of Schrager's work ethos, the owners agree, has crept into their work. "He was a perfectionist, with this hyper, exciting energy that made you want to work twice as hard," says Ford. "And his attention to detail - he'd rush over to the hotel if the bedspread was draped wrong."

The ladies aren't sure they're up for a visit from Schrager and his hypercritical eye yet, but Schrager says he's game.

"I'd be interested if they invited me," says Schrager. He still laments the loss of Ford: out of the three, she worked most closely with him. "With Terry involved, I'd say their prospect of success is terrific."

The women are already angling to open another hotel, perhaps in six months. They'd like to have three hotels in total; three hotels for three women.

"Three men couldn't do this," says Ford, "They'd always fight."

Cara Buckley covers the tourism and entertainment industries and welcomes tips at cbuckley@herald.com

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