



# Mrs. Palm Beach

*An exclusive interview with philanthropist, author and socialite Hilary Geary Ross*

BY AVA ROOSEVELT

**H**ilary Geary Ross, a dear friend of many years, is a columnist for *Quest* magazine and an author of a recently published book *Palm Beach People* with world-renowned photojournalist Harry Benson. More than anyone, she personifies the allure of a town that has attracted the super wealthy, elite, imposters and famed fortune hunters for more than 100 years.

The days of Palm Beach all began back in 1878, when the Spanish brig *Providencia* was hauling a cargo of 20,000 coconuts bound from Havana to Barcelona. It ran aground on what was then known as Lake Worth. Local residents claimed the coconuts as salvage, and within a decade, the area was filled with palm trees – leading to the island’s new name, Palm Beach.

Each year, during cold winter months up north, this breathtaking city, etched in our memory, inspires thousands to flock here craving R&R Palm-Beach style. Extremely high real estate prices and hotels full of visitors prove it. I sat down with Hilary to chat about the allure of living in Palm Beach.

**Ava Roosevelt:** *I understand your grandparents introduced you to Palm Beach. What is your fondest memory?*

**Hilary Geary Ross:** I came to visit my grandparents as a tiny tot and my earliest memory was of devouring a fresh orange on a stick at the Bath and Tennis Club, which is still served at the poolside. My grandparents were both writers and big readers. They gave me a book each month from Doubleday, which I think is a great present for any child.

**Ava:** *What has changed in Palm Beach since then?*

**Hilary:** Palm Beach has always been a glittering resort, but I think it has improved with age, like a fine wine. There are many more cultural institutions, like The Kravis Center, The Four Arts, The Norton Museum of Art, The Palm Beach Cultural Council and, of course, The Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach. There are also more golf courses, beautiful tennis courts and terrific restaurants. I only wish there was still a movie theatre on this island.

**Ava:** *What do you enjoy most about living in Palm Beach?*

**Hilary:** I love the wonderful climate and the fascinating people who live here. A perfect day starts out with breakfast outside on

---

*“I came to visit my grandparents as a tiny tot and my earliest memory was of devouring a fresh orange on a stick at the Bath and Tennis Club, which is still served at the poolside.”*

---

my loggia, followed by a 5-mile walk with my sister, a golf lesson, lunch at home, then tennis with my husband and off to dinner at a pal’s house.

#### LIFE AT WINDSONG

Often seen impeccably attired and always on the arm of her financier husband, billionaire Wilbur Ross, the couple says they have always loved Palm Beach, so it was a ‘natural’ for them to choose this heavenly spot to live.

Wilbur and Hilary’s house in Palm Beach is a 1939 Georgian Revival manor named Windsong. It is a masterpiece by high-society architect John L. Volk. Tucked away in the estate section of the island, it overlooks the Intracoastal Waterway. In 2004, their main house won the *Ballinger award* with architect Thomas Kirchoff and designer Bunny Williams. Then, in 2010, the newly built guest home earned the couple, Kirchoff and designer Mario Buatta, the coveted 2010 Elizabeth L. and John H. Schuler Award from the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach.

**Hilary:** Windsong faces south with hypnotic views of the Intracoastal Waterway. The traditional floor plan, with its high ceilings and large windows, has an ease, grace and flow perfect for entertaining with a center hall connecting the dining room and living

room and library. There are wonderful details, such as seashell moldings that we mimicked in the guesthouse. When we bought the house, the loggia was enclosed, so we opened it up to return it to its ‘former self’ as it was originally designed. Wilbur and I were ‘over the moon’ with happiness when we heard about the Schuler award for the guesthouse that we built with our ‘dream team.’ It truly was a joy to work with a trio of geniuses! Thanks to Mario Buatta’s talented hand, it is remarkably comfortable, yet glamorous. Plus, it was finished on time!

#### THE PHILANTHROPIST

Hilary supports local causes, small and large, with gusto, charm and disarming ease. From the opening of a designer’s boutique on Worth Avenue, to sitting on the board of the iconic Preservation Foundation, she divides her time and charitable efforts between Palm Beach and New York. In the Big Apple, she sits on the boards of The Boys’ Club of New York and Central Park Conservancy.

As a fellow board member of the Palm Beach Preservation Foundation, both Hilary and I deeply care about preserving the architectural beauty of a town we both love and call home.

#### WHAT’S NOT TO LOVE?

It’s impossible not to love a town where the only serious crime is gossip. The awe-inspiring architecture and pristine climate only two and a half hours away from New York by air are irresistible to many including 29 billionaires who own properties in Palm Beach. Forbes identified industrialist David Koch as the Palm Beacher with the highest net worth, estimated at \$40 billion. Being rich doesn’t hurt, but vast wealth is not a primary prerequisite to call Palm Beach home.

**Ava:** *Tell us please about the concept of your book, **Palm Beach People**, in which you collaborated with photo-journalist Harry Benson. (Harry was interviewed in the Spring 2015 issue of **South Florida Opulence**.) In a town where ‘belonging’ is paramount, how did you manage to choose among your friends who would be invited and who would not to appear in your book?*

**Hilary:** We tried to have a balance of people – artists, actors, philanthropists – all from different backgrounds and professions to paint an accurate portrait of the fabric of Palm Beach. We could easily do two more volumes, as there are so many great people we missed.

Writing about what she knows, Hilary provided an intimate insight to a town she loves. Well in keeping with her philanthropic nature, she generously donated the proceeds from the book to the Preservation Foundation. Living up to the title of Mrs. Palm Beach is a tall order, and could intimidate most, but I can stake my life on it, it won’t stop Hilary from being herself. ●



*Palm Beach People* is available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).