

# CHANGING TIDES

Colette Balateau and Pierre-Marie Bainvel took the leap that most people only talk about, giving up their conventional life in France to open one of Mexico's hippest new beach hotels

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The Palapa Suite's expansive private balcony at Colette Balateau and Pierre-Marie Bainvel's Casa Cal Ba hotel on the Yucatán island of Isla Holbox





When the couple purchased the house, it was yellow with a double-height living room and two bedrooms. They created a new ceiling in the living room, adding two suites on the second floor and one on the third-floor terrace. Skimming the house with sand-clad concrete makes it nearly disappear from view.

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hree years ago we actually did the thing that most people only talk about—quitting our jobs and moving to an island,” says Colette Balateau. “It’s been a dream without a single regret.” She and her

husband of seven years, Pierre-Marie Bainvel, left their lives, their friends, and Balateau’s four grown children behind in France in favor of a slower life at the northeastern tip of Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula on secluded Isla Holbox. “We came once before on vacation,” Balateau says, recalling swimming every day past a yellow house overlooking the beach. “I joked to my husband that I wanted to live here, but we really had no plan.” But chatting with neighbors comes naturally in a 2,000-person community where there are no cars, no postal service, and very few shops. A chance encounter with Marco, a Swiss expat working in the intriguing yellow house, changed the couple’s life. “We came across him on the beach, and he invited Pierre-Marie and me over. Ten minutes into the visit Marco told us it was for sale. I responded that we were going to buy the house and change our life,” she says.

Balateau and Bainvel spent the 10 hours traveling home to Bordeaux the next day discussing the change they needed. “In France, we would eat breakfast together, go to our offices, and not see each other until dinner. When you meet someone at 50 like we did, you want to start spending all your time together right away.” And, Bainvel adds, work less overall. From Bordeaux, the two began peppering the current owners to sell them the house only to find out that it was under contract to Mexican businessmen. “They thought we were just dreamers,”



A large serpentine concrete platform topped with a mix of cushions and pillows invites guests to lounge in the lobby that was formerly the living room.





The balcony of Room 5 opens directly onto Casa Cat Ba's beach.



Bainvel and Balateau host sunset cocktails every night at the bar to get to know their guests. The space doubles as a gathering spot for breakfast and laptop sessions before logging off for a day of beach time.



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The penthouse Palapa Suite pairs the blues of the Gulf of Mexico with a hanging LRNCE rug from Marrakech.



In Room 5, the bed rests on a platform that doubles as a stepped bedside table, with a jute-fringed chandelier for lighting. Balateau imported a touch of French elegance with the grisaille artwork left unframed.

Balateau says. Distraught but determined, she found herself fired up enough to open her laptop at 4 a.m. and plead her case. “I sent a long email explaining our situation, our previous lives, and that turning the house into a small hotel was our ticket to a better life together.” As fate would have it, the owner responded near-instantly that she and *her* husband had shared that same dream but could never make the full break from their busy lives to achieve it.

Previous contracts were broken, and Balateau and Bainvel came to Isla Holbox in March 2018 with eight suitcases and a quest to become first-time hotel proprietors. The couple spent the spring and summer planning the two-bedroom home’s transformation into a five-room hotel. First, the name: Casa Cat Ba. “I named it after the Vietnam island where my mother was born,” Balateau says, “to honor her.” The couple

sketched remodeling ideas, and Balateau put together mood boards for the interiors, “pulling together materials and colors that reflect a wabi-sabi spirit,” she says. “Beige, like the color of sand outside, is the main color of the home, with touches of turquoise that match the ocean.” Bainvel says they wanted the hotel to remain discreet: “It’s hidden behind big palm trees so you can barely see it from the water.”

A team of 10 local carpenters worked every day for three months, and Casa Cat Ba opened officially in December 2018. Now, the couple live in a small house in the hotel’s backyard and run the bustling getaway with five employees. “Guests arrive as strangers, and most leave as friends. Now we know people all over,” says Bainvel. “We really are a success story,” adds Balateau. “It’s been a good lesson for my children. You can change and have more than one life.”



Get here: Major airlines fly into Cancun International Airport from most cities; from there it’s a taxi and ferry ride to Isla Holbox. For rates and more about Casa Cat Ba, visit [casacatba.com](http://casacatba.com).