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The Old Gentleman & His Paradise Isle Ballast Key

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Ballast Key is a remarkable place in various respects: 15 kilometres west of Key West, the island is the southernmost inhabited place in the USA. It's also the only patch of land in the whole of the Key West National Wildlife Refuge that is privately owned. Its owner David Wolkowsky covered his 110,000 sqm isle with palm trees and built a house for himself, plus a guesthouse for his many friends: Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Tilda Swinton...

(Text and Production: Uta Abendroth; Photos: Mark Seelen)

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A dream. Nothing more, nothing less. That's how David Wolkowsky sees his home, Ballast Key can be reached from there in just under 25 minutes by boat – or ten minutes by helicopter. Upon arrival, this idyllic island hideaway emanates a wonderfully wild and eccentric charm.

PROPERTY DETAILS: USA, Key West **PRICE** US-\$ 15,8 Mill. **INTERIOR APPROX.** 370 sqm **LAND APPROX.** 110,000 sqm **E&V ID** E-0013H9 **CONTACT** Florida Keys (US) Tradewinds International Real Estate of Monroe County, LLC Licence Partner of Engel & Völkers Florida Residential, LLC **TEL.** +1 305 776 20 25 **E-MAIL** monika.sundstrom@engelvoelkers.com **WEBSITE**



"My guests here over the years? The British prime minister Edward Heath, Nancy Sinatra, Leonard Bernstein, Prince Michael of Greece ..."
David Wolkowsky



It is quite an unusual thing for an island to be given such a personal nickname. But, for very good reason, Ballast Key is quite the exception: It is affectionately known amongst the locals as "Wolkow's Key", after its owner David Wolkowsky. He in turn has been given the epithet "Mr. Key West" – a name that expresses respect and admiration, as well as the gratitude that the residents of Key West feel towards him. Had it not been for the now 94-year-old architect and investor, the 25,000-resident town on the southernmost tip of Florida would in all probability not look anything like it still does today. Ernest Hemingway's house would still be standing in its wonderful tropical garden, but other than that... Many of the so-called Conch Houses, mostly two-storey wooden structures on stilts and with shady verandas, were built in the 19th century. Immigrants from the Bahamas had brought over this architectural style with them from their islands. Wolkowsky bought more than 100 of these architectural jewels over the decades and proceeded to refurbish them, thus saving them from decay or demolition. Today they form an integral

part of Key West’s image, or rather they are what makes this little town so charming. David Wolkowsky’s grandfather arrived in Key West from Russia in 1880, opened a shop on Duval Street and went on to acquire plots of land that he then developed. David spent his childhood in Key West, moving to Philadelphia in the 1940s where he studied Medicine to begin with, and then Architecture, at the University of Pennsylvania. It was there that he first made a name for himself by transforming Rittenhouse Square from a slum into a desirable neighbourhood. He returned to Key West in 1962. There wasn’t even a hotel there at the time – that is, until Wolkowsky opened his “Pier House” in 1968. It was thanks to this hotel that artists and writers such as Isamu Noguchi, Robert Motherwell, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and James Merrill discovered the laid-back charm of the Key West lifestyle, and it was in this very hotel that Bob Marley and Jimmy Buffett were to launch their careers.



Ballast Key owes its name to the ship's debris that was left strewn across the entire island after a Spanish galley sank here in these waters in 1630. When David Wolkowsky first acquired the island, it was overgrown with mangroves. He planted palm trees, built a main house, a guesthouse and pavilions, all providing shelter from the sunshine in which to cherish the sensational views.

There is a large room on the first floor of the main house from which the vista sweeps almost 360°. All three floors of the wooden property are filled with furniture acquired from around the world, personal photos, exquisite paintings and thousands of books. A spiral staircase leads the way up to the very top of the house, where one is greeted by the joy of a ceiling painted in the colours of the ocean.

Key West evolved into the place to be for eccentrics, hippies and bohemians. And always at the heart of it all: David Wolkowsky. Full of energy, restless, and constantly on the lookout for a new project. Then, at the beginning of the 1970s, an opportunity of a very special kind was to come his way: The Navy was keen at the time to dispense with an island it had used during the Second World War as a target for bombing practice. Wolkowsky paid 160,000 dollars and from then on he was fortunate enough to call Ballast Key his own: a 110,000 sqm island with nothing but mangroves and a few dried up shrubs. To begin with, he would travel over with a few friends for picnics – then he began work on his grand designs with characteristic gusto. He had palm trees brought

over and planted flora and fauna. He arranged countless statues, animal figures and amphorae in between the island's rampant green vegetation. And then he began work on a house at the southern tip of the island, inspired by an old lighthouse on the Gulf of Mexico with an added touch of "Conch House" flair. The wooden construction is built on stilts, comprising three levels in total, and graced by a gently receding metal roof. The large first-floor salon isn't the only room in the house with a view either. From every room (including the bathrooms), and from the balconies and verandahs, the vista sweeps across the ocean: a sea of colours ranging in nuance from hues of lapislazuli to shades of turquoise and stretching as far as the horizon.



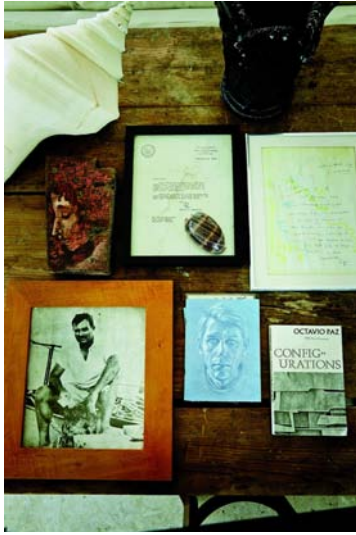
"I could tell you a story about every single object in here. I always got the greatest pleasure from looking around the flea markets of Paris."

David

Wolkowsky

Before David Wolkowsky started building on the 110,000 sqm island, he often came over with friends and enjoyed picnics here

enjoyed picnics here. Many artists have gathered on the island over the years, perhaps most notably the legendary author Tennessee Williams, who visited the island on frequent occasions to paint. The large paravent on the terrace was painted by a student of Matisse. Above the red and yellow sideboard in the top-floor room hangs a painting by the Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux, while small stone pugs also feature throughout the house. In the novel "Licence To Kill", 007 rings Wolkowsky from the island and says, "David, it's James, James Bond... I've broken into your island. I hope you don't mind".



There is a wonderful sensation here of being completely alone for

oneself, joined only by the splashing of the waves, with the wind on one's skin and the sight of the sun as it rises and falls over the unhindered sky. "Isn't it beautiful here?" says David Wolkowsky, with an undertone of enthusiasm in his voice that hasn't wavered even after all these years as the island owner. For some, Ballast Key, the southernmost inhabited island in the USA, is sure to evoke comparisons with what one would imagine Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island to be like. It is hard to believe that civilization is just a stone's throw from here. Wolkowsky has certainly made sure that the odd home comfort is to be found here too: After years without running water, he had a desalination system installed on the island, which provides sufficient drinking water. He also had wooden decks built on posts with roofs in various peaceful spots dotted around the island so that the views can be enjoyed here relaxing on a deckchair in the shade, whatever the position of the sun or the direction of the wind. And to make sure that his guests' boats can moor here even at low tide, Wolkowsky has also had an extra-long landing stage built out into the ocean. And visitors came (and still come) frequently and with relish. Their host had a guesthouse erected for them, comprising three bedrooms and a salon. Just like in the main house, the inimitable artistic sensibility of the connoisseur and collector Wolkowsky is unmistakable: There is hardly a wall that isn't adorned with a painting by an artist of repute, while the furniture seems to have found its way to the island from all corners of the globe. And wherever one looks, ceramics, books, photos and personal mementos fill the space. All testaments to an eventful life, which has played out for the most part since the 1960s between Key West and Ballast Key. Even though David Wolkowsky is bidding farewell to his island, it will forever remain inextricably linked with him: In the James Bond novel "Licence to Kill", the secret agent 007 seeks refuge on the island and calls Wolkowsky at his house in Key West: "David, it's James, James Bond...I've broken into your island. I hope you don't mind". "My," David replies, "How ingenious of you."



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