

Welcome to Hicksville

This is the life – living on one paradise island and weekending on another. Jeffrey Podolsky visits royal rebel India Hicks

'Do you have my head of lettuce?' India Hicks, the 34-year-old model, goddaughter of the Prince of Wales, bridesmaid to Diana, eyes the romaine lettuce I produce from my luggage as though it were the crown jewels. I've come to visit her on the island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas, a short taxi-boat ride away from where she and her family live on Harbour Island. Her late father, David Hicks, built a winter home here, Savannah, a concrete structure that, to the untrained eye, resembles a bunker.

I've come bearing other gifts, too: fancy pasta sauce, olive oil, mozzarella and Parmesan cheese, toys for her boys, Felix and Amory, and a copy of *The New York Times* for their 41-year-old father, David Flint Wood, who, dressed in a faded blue and pink linen sarong with a cigarette dangling from his lips, looks like a tropical Ian Fleming character wielding a paintbrush. I remove one last item I've lugged all the way from Manhattan: a skimpy yoga T-shirt my dear friend had asked for and which I was immensely pleased with myself for finding. But what really excites her is the groceries.

What have the royals come to? If only India's grandfather, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, could see her now, dressed in a pink string bikini, grovelling for some decent lettuce. Like her grandfather, India has always been bold and resourceful – it wasn't for her soft-spoken ways that he called her Decibel. If need be, she can always borrow a few ounces of radicchio from her Harbour Island neighbours Diane von Fürstenberg and her Hollywood mogul husband Barry Diller, or multimillionaire

Johnny Pigozzi. Both Diller and Pigozzi have boats, er, huge yachts, handy for transporting their lettuce.

They aren't her only neighbours. There is Elle Macpherson, the nightclub dowager Regine, and Janie Wenner, estranged wife of *Rolling Stone* Pooh-Bah Jan Wenner. According to the owner of a funky, dilapidated island hotel, recent visitors have included Mick Jagger, Lenny Kravitz, Harrison Ford, Robert De Niro, Martha Stewart, the Duke of York, Sarah, Duchess of York and editor of *American Vogue* Anna Wintour and Shelby Bryan. Even Bill

Gates recently took a spin in a golf cart (there are no cars) around the island's narrow streets looking to buy some land (and, no, he didn't make an offer for the entire island, three miles long by half a mile wide).

All this traffic is why India and David have spent the last year refurbishing her family home next door on Eleuthera. Much to their dismay, Harbour Island is no longer the remote hideaway they chose to raise a family on six years ago. It has grown increasingly fashionable and is on the verge of becoming a baby St Bart's during Christmas and Easter. Some fear that it is



From left, Lady Sarah Armstrong-Jones (just seen), India Hicks, Sarah Jane Gaselee, the Princess of Wales, Clementine Hambro and the Queen

only a matter of a few more Jimmy Hendrix purple-haze sunsets before they see P Diddy and his gold-chained entourage jet-skiing past the Landing, an 18th-century inn, restaurant and shop that India and David restored and now own. 'When we first came here, hardly anybody had heard of Harbour Island,' says India. 'Now it's just extraordinary who you bump into at the bar. A scandal is just waiting to happen. There's too much money and partying.' But residency has its privileges. Only on Harbour Island can India have Barry Diller over for a rum and tonic and hit him for \$15,000 for the local primary school that Felix attends (where a sample lesson includes the moral: 'If you thieve, the devil will come and chop your neck').

'Eleuthera makes Harbour Island look like New York,' says David, 'so we come here to get away from it all.' Savannah has become their weekend country house. India's father, inspired by an Egyptian tomb, designed the isolated structure in 1967 and last year David and India set about restoring it. David oversaw the installation of a new roof, plumbing system and kitchen, while India ordered Philippe Starck clear Perspex chairs, fluorescent air chairs, sofas and bathroom fixtures.

'This is where I feel most comfortable in the world,' says India. Her uncle and aunt, Lord Brabourne and Countess Mountbatten of Burma, and their brood live across the road in Provender, a modest house by the sea where the Prince and Princess of Wales once holidayed, though India couldn't 'see Diana enjoying herself here – there's nothing to do'.

India was particularly close to her grandfather. She recalls how, as children, she and her older sister, Edwina, used to brush his upper lip with a blade of grass to help him slip into his afternoon nap. He was killed when the IRA blew up his fishing boat in 1979. His state funeral is such a painful memory that India, seldom at a loss for words, will only say: 'He loved that tiny boat. He threw lobster-pots out. Some days we all went. I didn't go that day. I heard the explosion. I have vivid Technicolor recollection of the entire day, and my way of dealing with it is not to discuss it.' She will also never forget the train ride from London to Romsey, Hampshire, where he was buried. It was her 11th birthday and her godmother, the Duchess of Kent, gave her a tiny cross engraved with the date: 5 September 1979.



India wears silk paisley top with jewelled neck, £1,540, by Louis Vuitton

The Prince of Wales often stayed at the Brabournes' before his marriage; he was given the 'fifth room', about the size of a broom cupboard, as the house was always full of kids and couples. When India was 11, she found herself in a tight squeeze with Charles – not in the broom cupboard but in a Sunfish sailing boat. 'One afternoon my mother insisted that I join him in his Sunfish. I was at that age when I was beginning to be shy around older men, but I squeezed into this minuscule sailboat with him. Of course, it wasn't the horrific, intimidating experience I'd expected.'

Nor was what might have been one of the most intimidating experiences of her life, two years later, when she was a bridesmaid at Charles's wedding to Lady Diana Spencer. India was no stranger to royal bashes. At the Trooping of the Colour she would wait for

her grandfather, the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales to arrive on their horses. 'We'd run down from Buckingham Palace, see them dismount, and the footmen would be waiting with these perfectly cut carrots on silver trays which we'd feed to the horses. Then there'd be trays of Smarties that all the kids would pounce on.'

India almost missed the royal wedding when crowds from the previous night's fireworks prevented her from returning to her parents' flat in Albany, Piccadilly. Luckily, she was with Edwina, who was dating Viscount Linley, so Princess Margaret invited her back to Kensington Palace. 'The next day I arrived at Clarence House in the same clothes I was wearing the night before. And there was Diana in jeans, with a tiara on, watching herself on television. If someone

got in her way, she would push them aside so she could keep an eye on herself.'

In St Paul's Cathedral, in her cream-coloured bridesmaid's dress ('I was such a tomboy, I hated wearing it'), with flowers in her hair and shoes that were far too small ('My feet were killing me'), India sat next to the vividly dressed, rather large King of Tonga, who had a special chair for the occasion and who 'passed sweets down the line'. Then came the tricky part: she and Sarah Armstrong-Jones had to fold Diana's 25-foot train into the carriage. 'Thank God we didn't screw up with half the world watching,' says India with a relief that, years later, is almost palpable.

She admits that she was 'kind of in awe' of Diana. 'Call it a schoolgirl crush. I was under her spell that day, despite my being such a tomboy. Diana was the fairy princess. She always wore tea rose, which I copied afterwards.' In the months after the wedding India received an odd assortment of fan mail and for years people recognised her on the street.

India is always the bridesmaid and never the bride. She prefers it that way, and has no intention of walking down the aisle just yet. 'The biggest commitment I can give to David is to have his child,' she says. 'A ring on my finger or being Mrs Flint Wood doesn't change my love for him.'

Although she and David had met many times over the years, romance didn't blossom until six years ago when she walked into the bar of the hotel he was managing on Harbour Island. David, who abhors the cold, left a successful London advertising career (and several girlfriends, including Lady Helen Windsor and Elle Macpherson) to pursue island life. Within four months he and India had bought Hibiscus Hill, a large plantation-style villa overlooking the gin-clear Sargasso Sea. A few months later India gave birth to Felix, now five. Three years ago Felix was joined by Amory.

India's father disapproved of her decision to have a child out of wedlock, and India was hardly surprised. 'We were never close,' she says of her father, who died four years ago from lung cancer. 'There was something about me that irritated him. It became a battle of wills towards the end.' What mattered far more was that her godfather, the Prince of Wales, and her mother,

Lady Pamela, to whom she is extremely close, were unfazed. As for any possible disapproval on the part of the royal family to her having two children out of wedlock: 'I say, "To hell with it." I did it. It's my life. Of course, I didn't play by the rules. But, then again, I've been fairly well behaved most of my life. I'm fairly scandal-free. I don't do drugs and I don't screw rock stars.'

The Queen did inadvertently meet Felix at the nuptials of India's first cousin the Hon Timothy Knatchbull, in 1998. The ceremony was held at Winchester Cathedral and was attended by most of the crowned heads of Europe. Children were specifically forbidden but India, always the rebel, brought baby Felix anyway. 'Lady P was furious,' David recalls. 'She said, "You're going to

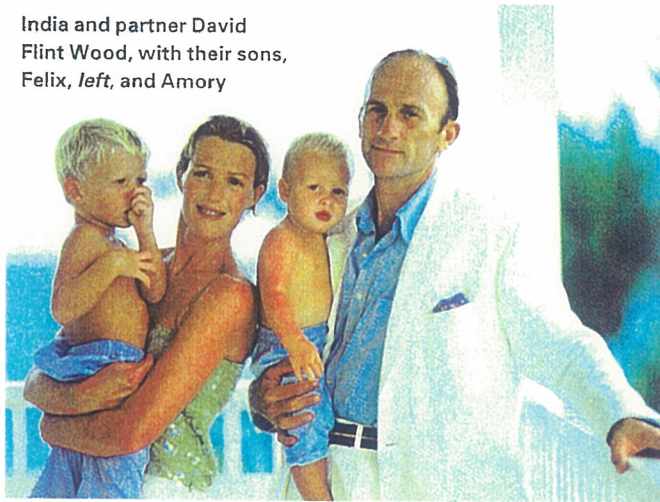
and rows of banana and Malayan coconut trees, the most visible fruits of David's labour. Except when India is spirited away in a jet sent by Ralph Lauren for his latest ad campaign, or when she's modelling for Tommy Hilfiger or Banana Republic. David, who is India's volume control, may be the father she never had. 'I have zero memories of my father doing anything with us,' she says of growing up at the family's estate, Brightwell Baldwin, in Oxfordshire. David, plays a nightly game of rugby tackle on the bed with his sons, grows a vegetable garden with Felix and spends hours building sandcastles with the boys. Together, India and David manage the two-storey plantation guesthouse on their property, which David built to accommodate such

friends as Lee Radziwill or the Hon Nat Rothschild, who flew his friend the Hon Lucas White down last November in the family jet to test out his new 70mph Magnum speedboat. Occasionally the house is let – for instance, for a Victoria's Secret ad campaign (picture Heidi Klum in a G-string, spread-eagled on a four-poster bed).

India's shop at the Landing, a potpourri of hard-to-find clothing and accessories gathered on her travels, has thrived. When Sarah, Duchess of York, dropped by with her two daughters last Easter, the princesses picked out Toby Mott T-shirts proclaiming 'I am a Princess'. On Easter Sunday Prince Andrew rallied the gang – which included his two daughters, Elle Macpherson's son, Julian Metcalfe's boys, Anish Kapoor's children and local Bahamian kids – for a rollicking Easter-egg hunt in 90°F. At India and David's, you're as likely to meet Prince Kyril of Bulgaria as Max of Minnesota.

Despite its budding reputation as a port of call for the jet-set, India and David have no plans to leave Harbour Island any time soon. They're already organising scrapbooks for a coffee-table tribute to island life to be published by Pavilion next year. 'I never thought my best friend would be a Bahamian girl,' India says. 'Harbour Island gave me that freedom. I feel claustrophobic in London because I'm forced into one circle and one scene. But as soon as Harbour Island truly becomes St Bart's, we'll move on.' Where will they go? 'Ah, now that's the great mystery,' she says mischievously. □

India and partner David Flint Wood, with their sons, Felix, left, and Amory



get a withering look from the Queen", who was seated two rows in front of us.' Felix wasted no time in making his presence known and India was forced to leave the cathedral. She returned for the procession, though, whereupon the Queen remarked to her: 'He's been awfully good, hasn't he?'

Although India hasn't the slightest idea what the Queen thinks of her unconventional domestic arrangement, she has heard royal 'mutterings about strange names popping up' among children of her generation: Lady Helen Windsor's children are called Cassius and Columbus; India's cousin Lady Joanna Zuckerman (née Knatchbull) named her daughter Eleuthera; another cousin, the Hon Michael-John Knatchbull, christened his daughter Savannah; Edwina's children are called Madison, May, and Jordan; and, of course, there is India's Amory.

India and David are more grounded than most married couples. They're together 24/7 at Hibiscus Hill, rich in bougainvillea