





TREE HOUSE

What do a ballet dancer, a film star and a paper tycoon have in common? The answer is the exclusive White Oak plantation in Florida, a sanctuary for several species of endangered wildlife and a centre for the arts. **Christine Toomey** explains.

Photographs by **Emily Mott**



WHEN ISABELLA ROSSELLINI first visited the White Oak plantation, hidden away among the pine trees, palmettos and tidal wetlands of Florida's northern border with Georgia, she was astounded. 'I had never been to a plantation in the south before, so had no idea what to expect,' she says. 'White Oak was like a Garden of Eden, a sort of Utopia.'

'Here was a place that was somehow pure, dedicated to goodness, to saving animals, creating art. It had a very positive energy, a sense of optimism. It was a place of new ideas.'

Such enthusiasm from so cosmopolitan an actress and model might sound hard to live up to, conjuring up images of lush vegetation and rare harmony between man and beast. Yet there is an element of unspoilt paradise about this 7,500-acre former rice plantation straddling the deep, slow-moving St Mary's River.

The White Oak stables, once used by personal guests of the Gilman family, now available to corporate guests at the plantation



Reticulated giraffe, one of 40 endangered or threatened species at the conservation centre. Opposite, Baryshnikov, who led several residences at White Oak and for whom Howard Gilman built a studio on the estate

Twenty years ago, White Oak was still the private estate of Howard Gilman, whose grandfather, Isaac Gilman, was to the US paper industry what the Rockefellers were to oil and Andrew Carnegie to steel. At that time it was mainly used to entertain Gilman family guests and company clients; but already Howard Gilman, a keen patron of the arts who took over chairmanship of the family business in 1973, had a vision of what he wanted to create at White Oak.

'Howard always took the long view. His business was based on working with trees that take 25 years to mature, so he was used to looking at the land in the long-term – over 100 years or so,' says Rossellini, who was first introduced to Gilman at a dinner party held for Mikhail Baryshnikov, with whom Rossellini was shooting the film *White Nights*. The Russian dancer had thought the pair would get along well because of their shared love of animals. 'At first I thought we were talking cats and dogs,' Rossellini recalls. 'But then Howard started talking about

his rhino, Phil; and I realised what he had in mind was something entirely different.'

At that time, Gilman had already carved out a small area of the estate as a refuge for indigenous endangered species, such as Florida panthers, and other, more exotic species in need of care. Over the following two decades, with the guidance of conservationist John Lukas, White Oak has become perhaps the most exclusive conservation facility in the world. The White Oak Conservation Center is now home to more than three dozen species of endangered and threatened animals – mostly from sub-Saharan Africa – kept in a secluded 600-acre section at the heart of the estate.

'As owners of the largest private paper company in the world, the Gilman family's wealth had come from the land, from trees,

*Below, an Indian rhino. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the golf pavilion; the Arena apartment; portraits of Baryshnikov with Isabella Rossellini, taken during the *White Nights* shoot, and of Ingrid Bergman; the dance studio*



Mikhail Baryshnikov and the late Howard Gilman
with the dancers of the White Oak Dance Project on
a Buick, in the early 1990s





and Howard Gilman felt an obligation to pay nature back for this good fortune,' explains Lukas. 'White Oak was where he did this, by creating a unique environment for conservation, culture and the arts. Nowhere else in the world will you find all these elements in the same place.'

The large herds of black and white rhinoceros, Grevy's zebra, reticulated giraffe, cheetah and other less-well-known species are not the only rare and beautiful occupants of this quiet corner

of northern Florida. Over the years, in addition to a regular stream of business clients, Howard Gilman invited many dancers and performing artists to spend time on the estate. In 1991 he built a spectacular glass-and-pine studio at White Oak for Baryshnikov, to whom he became a close friend and protector after the dancer defected to the USA. The studio subsequently became a residency centre for dancers and choreographers from all over the world. In addition to regularly hosting Baryshnikov, Mark Morris and other leading US artists, the programme has sponsored companies from as far away as China and central Africa.

Other high-profile guests of White Oak have included Bill and Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, Colin Powell, and many well-known actors, artists and musicians, plus conservationists and others concerned with animal welfare. Inspired by the work of White Oak, crime writer and former pathologist Patricia Cornwell recently pledged a donation of \$1 million over four years to the conservation centre, in recognition of which the animal-pathology lab has been named after her.

As far as Howard Gilman was concerned, White Oak was 'a place of peaceful, yet productive contemplation' for people and activities he cared about. In the past, part of the allure of

Above, the Old Lodge, where the Gilman family lived. Left, old flint-lock guns, part of the plantation's extensive collections of artefacts and art, on the lodge's walls. Opposite, the bar in the Bowling Alley in the Game Room





this place was certainly its privacy and for decades White Oak was open only to those invited personally by the Gilman family and its companies.

SINCE GILMAN'S DEATH SIX YEARS AGO, however, and the subsequent sale of the majority of the Gilman Paper Company assets, the Howard Gilman Foundation has had to look for ways to fund its operation. A public charity, Gilman International Conservation, has been set up to support the conservation centre and help finance its field programmes; and the accommodation is now available to corporate guests, who also have access to the facilities once at the disposal of the Gilman family's guests. These include a nine-hole golf course, a gym, facilities for water sports, horseback riding, swimming, tennis and sporting clays.

The accommodation comprises a series of relatively simply furnished lodges, cottages and apartments; what makes them unique is the collection of art and antiques they contain. Part of the estate's most precious collection – one of early photography – is held at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. But numerous other works of art and precious artefacts are housed at White Oak.

These include a collection of more than 100 antique decoy ducks, powder horns, flint-lock weapons and Delft china in The Old Lodge – once the Gilman family's private home. Antique Navajo wall hangings, Sioux Indian beadwork and Santa Clara pottery line the rooms of the nearby Roseland Lodge, where the Clintons stayed on two occasions. At the entrance to the Big Game Room and Great Hall, hung with 17th-century Flemish tapestries, is a leather beaded vest reputed to have belonged to

Geronimo. Inside, guests are served at a bar dominated by a giant Tiffany skylight recovered from the former Kellogg estate of Battlecreek, Michigan.

Corporate guests aside, performing artists will still be encouraged to attend workshops and retreats at White Oak through grants from the Conference & Residency Center. Conferences, particularly in the field of conservation and medical research, will also continue to be held here along with residencies for veterinary students. Groups who would like to sample a taste of what White Oak has long kept hidden can sign up for a limited number of private tours of the conservation centre.

The top priority, however, as Isabella Rossellini – now on the board of Gilman International Conservation – explains, is to preserve the calm, quiet atmosphere needed for the wildlife at White Oak to thrive. 'Howard was determined that his vision should continue after his death,' she says, stressing that measures undertaken to raise funds are designed to impact on the animals as little as possible.

Idealistic as this sounds, it seems achievable. For while the animals can be seen from most of the lodges, White Oak's wildlife still seems eerily of another world. Every morning, through the early mist and still weak sunlight, the graceful profile of a herd of giant eland can be seen strolling gently in and out of view from the sitting room of the Arena apartment. Some distance away, hidden among the dense foliage of their own vast compound, a group of small, dark and secretive, but extraordinarily

Above, the Game Room: facilities include pool tables and a gym. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Dave Thompson, director of conservation; an alabaster tortoise from Seychelles; an okapi from central Africa; magnolia blossom



beautiful okapi – the only living relative of the giraffe – forage for food. While some of White Oak's most unique wildlife are birds – such as the ferocious, giant cassowaries from Australasia which, if crossed, can eviscerate a human being in seconds with their talons – the majority of species at the centre are mammals.

From very early on, great emphasis was placed on White Oak's links with the conservation projects it supports and funds in countries many of the animals come from, such as the Okapi Conservation Project – covering 8,500 square miles of the rich Ituri rainforest in the heart of the Democratic Republic of Congo – where the most pristine remaining habitat of the okapi is preserved. White Oak also acts as the operational centre of the International Rhino Foundation and is a long-term partner of the Cheetah Conservation Fund.

'We are determined that our work here will make a difference and that those who come here will go out and make a difference in the world, too,' says John Lukas, now president of Gilman

International Conservation. One unique research project involves British-born scientist Linda Penfold who has developed a protocol with the US Department of Agriculture and the Kenya Wildlife Society to field-collect semen from free-ranging male gerenuk antelope. The semen will then be frozen and shipped to White Oak to be used in artificial insemination trials. If the project is successful, it could have a profound effect on the future of conservation.

As David Thompson, the director of conservation at White Oak points out, the beauty of such a private facility is that it can back such specialised projects without having to concentrate on pleasing a paying public. 'We do not have to choose a "stamp collection" of animals here to please visitors. We are not

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Giant eland, *below*, which can be seen from the White Oak lodges and, *opposite*, a pair of southern bald eagles. Success stories at the conservation centre include the birth of 14 white rhino and six black rhino calves





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in the business of drawing people's interest,' says the genial Texan, adding that the number of people who come through White Oak each year is about the same as on a slow Saturday in a metropolitan zoo. 'Our criteria in deciding which animals to keep is whether we can make a difference to the survival of their species.'

The centre's success on this count can be measured by its remarkable record for producing young among rare species, some of which have been brought here after strenuous efforts to promote their breeding elsewhere have failed. In recent years a total of 14 white rhino and six black rhino calves have been born at White Oak, as well as 73 cheetah cubs, including two litters born recently to cheetahs donated to the centre by the Namibian government.

Among the most recent and challenging animals to be brought to the centre in the hope that they will breed is a pair of Indian rhinos that showed little romantic interest in each other while living at Miami Zoo and the National Zoo in Washington, DC. 'They are a very solitary species, and notoriously aggressive and noisy when mating, which is not particularly palatable for the public,' Thompson explains. 'We're giving them some privacy here and encouraging them to take an interest in each other.' One way of doing this is to spray liberal amounts of urine from another male rhino and from a female rhino in heat around their enclosure. 'It is showing some signs of working,' says Thompson with a broad smile.

To all other definitions of White Oak, Isabella Rossellini adds perhaps the most touching. 'Everything at White Oak,' she says, 'is designed to create the most "romantic" atmosphere possible for the animals.' In contrast to Florida's more usual fare of sun, sand, sea and garish theme parks, this is indeed a place to savour an environment that isn't, for once, about the instant gratification of the human race at the expense of other species. ⑦

GETTING TO WHITE OAK



For more information on White Oak, visit www.giconline.org. Tours cost about \$125 per person, including lunch, and are subject to availability; call 00 1 904 225 3200. White Oak is 12 miles from the town of Yulee which is about 13 miles north of Jacksonville International Airport and seven miles inland from Amelia Island. The island offers a variety of accommodation options including the **Florida House Inn** (00 1 904 261 3300; www.floridahouseinn.com; doubles from \$149), and **Elizabeth Pointe Lodge** (00 1 904 277 4851; www.elizabethpointelodge.com; doubles from \$155).