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Bed and breakfasts offer a different experience

A taste of Victorian, a taste of kitschy

By VICTOR GRETO
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REHOBOTH BEACH -- The Sea Witch Manor Inn is part illusion.

It's a multistoried Victorian bed and breakfast with splendidly themed rooms, from the bright, mostly white Sunrise Suite to the manly Suite William, with its red-leather-looking walls.

Then again, it's not really an *old* Victorian.

"It was built in the 1990s," said the owner, Inez Conover, of the building that's a sand pebble's throw from The Cultured Pearl restaurant.

For seven years, she and her partner, Kathleen Bailey, have been running the Sea Witch, at 71 Lake Ave., and two adjoining bed and breakfasts, Bewitched and BEDazzled.

They are among about a dozen bed and breakfasts in the Sussex County resort area.

"They're are fewer and fewer," Conover said. "It's sad, but insurance for bed and breakfasts has really skyrocketed. In downtown Rehoboth, there's probably only five or six traditional bed and breakfasts left."

B&Bs offer a fun alternative for a place to lay your head when you don't want the hassle of a house rental, but prefer something more personal than a hotel room.

And for Conover and Bailey, it offered a sort of permanent party.

"The reason I got into the bed and breakfast business to start with was that I was in corporate America and got tired of traveling," Conover said. "I wanted to have the people just come to me. I love people, and I used to do a lot of fundraisers for breast cancer and heart disease and just liked entertaining. I figured why not do it for real."

Historic visions at the Sea Witch (named after a local clipper ship, not some seaweed-draped crone) are evoked because the women who run it are antiques collectors.

Along with the antiques, rooms are decorated with flowery carpets, plush green chairs and red couches. Faux finishes, from the walls to the fireplaces and airy murals on the ceilings, were all done by local craftsman Michael Groton.

A 19th-century music box in the Sea Witch's dining room requires a penny to play it. Conover has to run upstairs to get a coin, but she's back in a minute. After slipping the penny into the slot, it plays something barely recognizable as a tune.

Two doors down is BEDazzled, a trip through early (but not too early) Hollywood, where Veronica Lake, Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck still radiate a dusty sexuality.

"When I was a little kid I would just sit in New Jersey and watch the Million Dollar Movie all the time, which were all the old movies," Conover said. "I just wanted to do it because of that. The hardest thing was deciding which rooms I was going to do for which actors. That was really a hard decision. If I did it all over again, I'd do it all differently."

The small Clark Gable suite is decorated in black and beige, like his favorite automobile. It contrasts with the larger Humphrey Bogart suite on the second floor.

It feels like it could have been the bedroom in "Casablanca" where Bogie had a heart-to-heart with Ingrid Bergman.

The Moroccan feel of the bed and drapes, those vertically striped bathroom walls, even the Maltese falcon, a nod to one of Bogie's best pictures, perched on a wooden sconce, feel cool, not kitschy.

The Marilyn Monroe suite, complete with a small painting of JFK, his self-satisfied profile looking toward the bed, is all tongue-in-cheek.

If you want more kitsch, that's what the Bewitched bed and breakfast is all about. The inn uses the 1964-1972 Elizabeth Montgomery TV series "Bewitched" as its inspiration.

"'Bewitched' was my favorite television show when I was growing up," Conover said. "It was really one of the best and one of the most diverse. It dealt with the differences in people."

If you don't want to hang out in town or all that close to the beach, you can linger beside a lagoon in a lounge chair, or soak in a nearby hot tub or heated swimming pool, at the eight-acre Lazy L at Willow Creek bed and breakfast, off Del. 1 in Lewes.

The "Must Love Dogs" welcome mat on the enclosed porch where a two-course breakfast is served tells you that this is a canine-friendly place.

There are two other indications: the yelping dogs behind owner Debbie Estes' doors, and the acre-wide enclosed dog run.

"We have a lot of returning clientele," said Richard Hudson, the manager, who helps Estes prepare the meals.

Even in the off-season, Hudson said there are plenty of birdwatchers who stay at the Lazy L.

By the end of April, he was taking off the cover to the swimming pool, preparing for the summer rush.

Aside from the five nondescript small rooms with private baths, there are four large "common" rooms, variously filled with exercise equipment, a pool table, TVs and chairs.

And there's a separate cottage near the dog run.
