

---

# EXPAT LIVING IN BERLIN: *Diva Style*

---

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCUBBIN

*Global Living* magazine spent the day with Toma Clark Haines, Chief Executive Diva of The Antiques Diva® & Co European Tours, in the heart of Berlin where we discovered a silver-lined life in the city.





With a champagne glass in one hand and a shopping bag in the other, Toma Clark Haines, Chief Executive Diva of The Antiques Diva® & Co European Tours, defines global living.

“Europe is my playground!” exclaims the American expat entrepreneur who juggles her time between making a home in Berlin with husband BJ Haines, a Finance Director at Capgemini, and a career that has her traveling several times each month to Paris, London, Florence, Amsterdam, Brussels and beyond, taking clients on exclusive, one-on-one, customized buying trips abroad.

“When I wake each morning, the first question I ask myself,” jokes Toma, “is whether I should say Buongiorno, Bonjour, Guten Tag or simply Good Day.”

Knowing which country she’s waking up in is only one of the challenges this jetsetter faces on a daily basis as she operates a company in six countries with her team of locally-based Diva Guides. Compound that with the fact that during 15 years of marriage, she has relocated six times with her husband’s career, living in four different countries – including five years in France and four in Holland – in addition to various cities in the United States.

To make their career-centric marriage work, Toma hung up her corporate chapeau in advertising, deciding instead to pack her profession in a suitcase so she could live and work globally, making both his and her career fit hand-in-white-gloved-hand.

“Each time my husband is transferred to a new locale, I use his international transfer as a stepping stone for me to expand my business, offering tours in a new country,” she says.

***“A home that mixes periods and price tags punctuates in a way that a house all of one genre, one design or one echelon does not.”***

Working and living globally isn’t always easy, however.

“My biggest challenge is staying grounded – both literally and figuratively. If my home life is balanced, then everything else falls

into place. The secret to success when living abroad is making my house feel like home – and to me that means filling it with treasured items, friends, food and festivities.”

Of course, a ‘fete Chez Haines’ is never a casual affair. After all, Toma is a lifestyle guru who makes her living by marketing ‘the Diva lifestyle.’

On this evening in particular, Toma and her husband have gathered 10 friends for a party in their Berlin Mitte apartment. Situated in the shadow of the German Reichstag in what was once East Berlin, the ‘Haines Haus’ is located in a building that was first used as Soviet Headquarters following the Second World War. Today, their home is a virtual United Nations with a typical gathering of a melting pot of ethnicities flavoring the affair.

Tonight, into the ‘pot’ go Norwegians, French, Canadians, South Africans, Australians, Brits and Americans, all served up alongside a



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCUBBIN



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCUBBIN

spread by CHEFinBERLIN, a local catering company and cooking school owned by Jill DiGiovanni, another Berlin-based expat entrepreneur.

“Champagne is an essential party ingredient,” confides Toma, citing her caterer and good friend DiGiovanni, “as is an international menu that can be eaten standing up!”

At the Diva’s parties, nevertheless, there are always enough chairs for all the guests. Not only does Toma help tourists, interior designers and antique dealers buy antiques abroad, she has also furnished her own apartment with high-end flea market finds. Defining her style as an eclectic mix of precious and pop, Toma blends Baroque, turquoise, velvet-covered gilt chairs with an uber-modern white glass table, believing that contrast in texture adds interest in interior decor. In her living room, she pairs an outdoor iron garden chair with a Louis XV chair and French country canapé centered around an Ikea coffee table.

Ikea and antiques?

“Absolutely,” says Toma. “Ikea is part of the world we live in – especially if you move as frequently as my husband and I do. The secret to decorating with pieces from Ikea is to mix and match. A home that mixes periods and price tags punctuates in a way that a house all of one genre, one design or one echelon does not.”

But for this Diva, there’s another design component *every* diva should keep in mind.

“Perhaps the most important thing I consider when decorating my home,” she confides, “is that everything must have meaning. Before

starting my antique-shopping-abroad business, I studied interior design at a school in London and quickly realized that my personal decorating philosophy contrasted with the career I was considering pursuing after leaving advertising.”

Though she loved design, she balked at the idea of hiring her own decorator.

“Putting their purchases into my home simply didn’t resonate with me,” she says, adding that it was more like buying *their* memories, and not her own.

To combat this issue, Toma developed a company that helps people find their own unique pieces during their travels with her or her local guides. In French, the word ‘souvenir’ means memories, and that is what the Antiques Diva® tours are all about.

“We help people who are traveling abroad to buy a piece of Europe or England that they can bring home and display on their mantle,” she says. Clients contact Toma and her Diva Guides to book everything from a half-day tour up to a 14-day, six-country tour in

England, Belgium, Italy, France, Holland and Germany.

“Some clients know exactly what they want – a special armoire or antique Venetian chandelier,” she explains, “...and they know they can buy it cheaper at the flea markets in Europe than at a posh store in America or Australia – even after adding shipping costs into the equation. But yet, they don’t know where to go to find what they’re looking for. That’s what we do; we show them where to go – in fact we accompany them there, saving them time and money by helping them negotiate, and then dealing with the hassles and headaches of getting their purchases home by liaising with international transporters.”

***“The secret to success when living abroad is making my house feel like home – and to me that means filling it with treasured items, friends, food and festivities.”***



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCURBIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCURBIN



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCURBIN



Other clients are more like Toma herself, living for what the French call ‘coup de foudre’ – love at first sight. These clients often go on tours looking for an experience and an opportunity to purchase ‘a piece with a past’ that says who they are, where they’ve been and where they’re going.

Toma often invites clients into her own home, where The Antiques Diva® & Co is headquartered in a corner office, letting clients enjoy an atmosphere that feels delightfully collected over a lifetime of travel.

As the Diva rests her feet on a Turkish rug, then pulls them up on her French bergère, she glances towards her bedroom swathed in luxury Italian linens and says, “Everything in our house, down to the sheets we sleep on each night, are memories. We bought our bed linens while

visiting the Belverve Linen factory for a private tour just outside Florence. When I commented that Belverve had the linens I wanted but not in the right color, Belverve CEO Jay C. Conti immediately offered to custom-design a pair to match my color scheme of ‘white and black.’”

The Diva was sold and the linens have a new home.

As Toma talks to her guests, her husband joins the conversation, giving his wife a quick peck on the cheek. Equally obsessed with décor and antiques, BJ collects the Art Deco statues seen around the apartment.

“I have my own ‘mantiques,’” he jokes, “... a grill from a 1932 Peugeot hangs on the wall in my bathroom, paired with a Paris-Copenhagen train track sign and an industrial lighting fixture.”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCURBIN



Jill DiGiovanni, owner of CHEFInBERLIN

## Taking a Bite out of Berlin

It seems that Canadian expat Jill DiGiovanni, owner of CHEFInBERLIN, a Berlin-based catering company and cookery school, found the perfect balance between her work and going to fabulous parties. DiGiovanni is able to work with individuals who, in their busy lives, don’t have time to juggle their own event-planning. She helps them create amazing parties so they can have the freedom to enjoy themselves and their guests. From set-up to decor, with five-star service and fabulous food, CHEFInBERLIN spoils clients with personal attention to detail.

When DiGiovanni started working abroad, she initially thought it might be difficult to operate a business overseas, but she quickly realized that the expat community was the ideal group to market her skills to. She now teaches a cooking course in English, conducts food tours and caters some of the best parties in Berlin.

DiGiovanni enjoys teaching private and group courses in the fundamentals of cooking, as she believes that cooking is a skill that can be passed on to others.

‘Fear Not the Knife’ is DiGiovanni’s most popular demo and, under her direction, people can learn how to master their kitchen knives like a pro, within a few hours. When you master that simple skill, a whole world opens up in your kitchen, giving new meaning to global living.

CHEFINBERLIN.COM





***"While most of the items you'll find around our home were purchased on our travels, we did bring a fair amount of our possessions with us when we moved overseas."***

supplies. Of course, some items are merely for décor, such as the piece hanging above her stove – an antique kitchen pig, a cut-out from a butcher's shop in Italy that names the parts of the pork in Italian. They also created additional kitchen storage by lining the shelves overhead with wooden wine crates gathered on their travels. In each box goes an assortment of items used seasonally, or when hosting parties and coffee mornings for local women's clubs and charities.

Speaking of things every home needs, Toma's advice is to invest in a good guest bed, whether a fold-out sofa in a room that can be closed off, or in a designated 'guest quarters.'

"Trust me, when you live overseas you'll have visitors. I'll never forget our first year living in Holland when we housed 16 sets of visitors in a year – I felt like we were running a Bed & Breakfast!"

With this many guests coming and going, a good system for managing visitors – and clutter – is essential. Their guestroom 'multi-purposes' as a storage room, with an Ikea bookcase headboard where they've stacked not only books, but wine as well.

"Before we sit down for dinner, we have guests bring a bottle from their headboard to the table," Toma says.

True to her philosophy of buying souvenirs abroad, even their wine collection is international. Last year, when traveling for a month



In the couple's other bathroom, there is an antique gilt plant stand from Budapest that holds a stone garden statue wearing a red hat. There's also a chandelier, a vintage Venetian mirror crowning the sink, and a shower that has been draped with a shower curtain behind, which Toma has cheekily transformed into a coat closet.

"When living in a country that doesn't equip their homes with closets, you have to be creative with the space," she explains. "Having two showers and no coat closet didn't seem practical to me, so I had to think outside the box."

The design-savvy duo believes that antiques and vintage should be used in every room of the house – with the key word being 'used.' In her laundry room, Toma fills a combination of vintage champagne buckets and antique Russian kitchen tins with sponges and laundry

**The International Women of Berlin**

As a small business owner, Toma Clark Haines knows how important networking with other small business owners is. She regularly makes it a point to connect with some of the most dynamic women in Berlin, brainstorming for ideas, sharing stories and simply having fun with other like-minded entrepreneurs. Di Venter (far left) is a South African-born interior designer and founder of MadeByDi, which creates custom-made clothing for babies and children, plus handbags and decor pieces. To the right of the Antiques Diva is her English friend Deidre Rooke, the President of the International Women's Club of Berlin and founder of 'Moja Pamoja,' a UK charity for the advancement of education projects in Northern Tanzania. Moja Pamoja means 'One Together' in Kiswahili, and is a name that reflects the need to work together with the local community to achieve goals. Working together is just what Australian Sally Irwin does as founder of iWILL – International Women Impacting Local Lives – an organization devoted to helping girls who've been forced into prostitution – to escape from their enslavement. On the far right is Jill DiGiovanni, a Canadian entrepreneur who runs Berlin's best catering company and cookery school – CHEFInBERLIN.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCUBBIN



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAILA MCCUBBIN

through Croatia, the Diva and her husband brought 70 bottles of Croatian wine back into the EU.

As sommelier of the household, BJ says, "Croatian wine is a conversation piece for dinner parties. Because it's rarely exported, few of our dinner guests have had the opportunity to quaff the Plavac Mali, and I love being able to share our experiences."

"While most of the items you'll find around our home were purchased on our travels," continues Toma, "we did bring a fair amount of our possessions with us when we moved overseas."

Her husband raises his eyes at this, elaborating, "I made the mistake of telling my wife she was in charge of dealing with all the details of our first international move. While I went ahead of her to start my job in France, she stayed behind in Cleveland, Ohio. What I didn't know was that, in my absence, she decided to clean house – getting rid of half our possessions before the move!"

Toma laughs and says, "When moving internationally, one must prioritize. I only packed the items to bring with us that had significance. My great-great grandparents' cutlery was essential, as were our photo albums and art. I did, however, decide to leave behind the hand-me-down furniture that my parents gave us when we wed right out of university! I knew that if I brought everything with me, we wouldn't have room to grow into the people we would become."

Nodding towards a stark black and white photograph on the wall, a barren landscape by Chad Love of the Oklahoma plains close to where she and her husband grew up, Toma reaches across the sofa to clasp her husband's hand.

"Wherever we go, our home goes with us. After all, a house is a home, if you make it one."

**Connect with Toma**

If you'd like more information on the Antiques Diva Tours, contact Toma at one of the following:



ANTIQUESDIVA.COM



@THEANTIQUESDIVA



THE ANTIQUES DIVA & Co