

Shea Gunther

Eco-entrepreneur blogs about politics, energy, and earth's resources



Monte Azul, Costa Rica: The boutique hotel where art meets environment

Monte Azul in Costa Rica is a resort that beautifully mixes the environment with art and luxury accommodations. Read about what makes it so special.

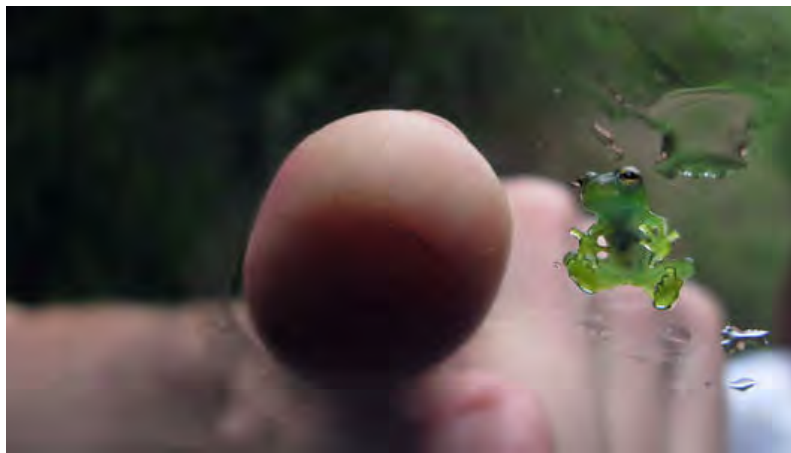


Photo: Jonathan Finkelstein. Monte Azul guest 2010

Last year I travelled to Costa Rica courtesy of the Costa Rican Tourism Board and to a 10-day tour of some of their top eco-tourism destinations. I came away deeply impressed with the commitment the people of Costa Rica have to preserving their natural resources. They understand the long-term value of not slashing and burning through nature in terms of both economics (making more money) and natural service (having clean drinking water). They get most of their energy from clean, renewable sources and have created wilderness preserves from border to border. It's no mistake that they are considered the top eco-tourism destination on the planet.



Photo: Café Blue at Monte Azul



View of Monte Azul



Casita Celeste, private terrace



Casita Celeste, primary rainforest in background



Monkey!

So it shouldn't be a surprise that the country would attract green-leaning entrepreneurs like Randy Langendorfer and Carlos Rojas Jara, owners and operators of the [Monte Azul](#), an art-focused boutique hotel nestled in the rainforested slopes of the Talamanca Mountains in southern Costa Rica. Two years after they first visited the country on vacation they sold off their homes, businesses, and most of their possessions and moved to Costa Rica to build their dream- a boutique hotel that embraces the arts as much as it did the environment.

Randy is a veritable Jack of all trades and has put his past experience as a building contractor and home restorer to good use not only overseeing the design and construction of the Monte Azul facilities but also handling the interior design and furniture selection.

Carlos also gets involved in the interior and furniture design and is head chef and chief menu developer. His menu is based entirely on what is available locally and has been described as "comfort food with just a little flare".

The hotel is located on the 100-acres Monte Azul Preserve, just minutes from Chirripó National Park, one of Costa Rica's more beautiful national parks. The preserve sits in stunning scenery, surrounded by mountains bursting with green in all directions. It's peaceful, wonderful, and a place I hope to make it back to some day. It's all the better that the land had been a clearcut dairy farm rife with animal poachers before Randy and Carlos took over. You would never be able to tell that now as the prime Costa Rican growing conditions have allowed nature to seize back the space with fierce speed. Today their land is chock full of native Costa Rican animals like the capuchin monkey, ring neck peccary, and [the sloth](#).



The greenhouse at the Monte Azul puts a lot of fresh tasty greens on the dinner table

Randy and Carlos invite a rotating cast of artists-in-residence who take advantage of the serene seclusion to take their art to new places. Hotel guests are encouraged to interact with the artists with an eye on collecting their work. Collectors are able to really get a sense for how the artist creates and can go home with pieces that comes with a deeper connection.

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You can find out more about the Monte Azul hotel by [visiting their \(well-designed\) website](#).

I was lucky enough to get [an interview with Randy and Carlos, click over](#) and read about how failure wasn't an option for them, why being green is vital to their mission, and which came first: the art or the hospitality.

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september 29, 2011

Interview with Randy and Carlos, owners of Costa Rica's Monte Azul boutique hotel



Randy Langendorfer and Carlos Rojas Jara of Monte Azul, Costa Rica

We caught up with Randy Langendorfer and Carlos Rojas Jara, owners and operators of the Monte Azul boutique art hotel, and found out why sustainability is so important to them.

Randy Langendorfer and Carlos Rojas Jara are the owners and operators of the [Monte Azul](#), an art-focused boutique hotel ([read my post about it here](#)) in Costa Rica that takes being environmentally sustainable very seriously. They were gracious in agreeing to answering some of my questions about what they're building down there.

MNN: Which came first with the Monte Azul, the art or the hospitality?

Carlos and Randy: Definitely the art. As owner of a small gallery in San Francisco, I was well aware of the changes occurring in that business. As the art market exploded, it was obvious that those who benefited were the very top players, artists as well as galleries. It followed the same trend we see in the world economies. Like in any other business, as a gallery we would have to stand out in order to survive, because offering the best service and inventory possible was not enough to compete with literally hundreds of other similar businesses.

Business aside, my partner and I were also tired of working too hard with little to show for it. We also craved a more sustainable existence and being close to nature. In essence, we were no longer interested in the "rat race" and yearned for a change in lifestyle more than anything.

We quickly realized that it had to be an all or nothing commitment. We sold all of our possessions, bought art studio equipment, including a wonderful 1978 Griffin printing press, and shipped it all off to Costa Rica. We were heading into completely uncharted territory. The project was originally conceived as an artist in residence program and was to be located in the rainforests of Costa Rica. The main idea was to invite artists to Monte Azul where we would offer them any necessary studio facilities and materials, while wining and dining them with the best possible service in exchange for inventory.

This is where the hospitality part of the project enters. During the planning phase we researched the boutique hotel market in Costa Rica and saw an opportunity for something like Monte Azul. To keep costs down, we sought a property off the beaten path and spent three years finding the perfect place. When first saw the property that is today Monte Azul, we knew it was magical. Located between two rivers with primary, secondary and pasture lands, the dairy farm was an ideal place. The climate is perfect, 70s to low 80s all year, and the property was located at the interface between wilderness (the Talamanca Forest is the largest in Central America) and a thriving agricultural community.



One of the art studios at Monte Azul

When did you know it was going to work?

Monte Azul had to work, we had no other alternative! In comparing Monte Azul with other projects, we saw that we were completely different, especially since we never came to the table with a hotel in mind. In fact, none of us has any experience in the hospitality industry, so we spent over a year just “practicing” with friends and friends of friends. From the very beginning, our feedback was extremely good and we even sold art to several guests. To date, MACA (Monte Azul Contemporary Art) is our main source of income. We find it poetic that the art, inspired at Monte Azul, is what is sustaining the project. It also allows us to function with a reduced number of rooms which has been a huge plus for our guests. Imagine renting out all four Casitas for family and friends and having 100 beautiful acres all to yourselves.

Why do people come back to the Monte Azul?

People come back for various reasons, the nature, the lovely grounds and facilities, and of course the food at Café Blue. However, what really makes a difference is the human element. Our staff is 100% from the area. People always comment on the level of service they receive at Monte Azul, which goes beyond the concept of good service. Our guests are sophisticated travelers and are used to excellent service. At Monte Azul however, they have distinguished our service as “personal” as well as genuine. Our motto has always been to treat people as individuals, not just as clients, and to respect differences and to value excellence over mediocrity. It is this genuine warmth as well as a commitment to quality in everything that we do that I think really brings our guests back.

Can you describe the concept of being a Long Run Destination? Why is that important to you?

The Long Run Destination (LRD) initiative is a sustainability model created by the Zeitz Foundation. More than just a certification, of which there are many of varying quality, the Zeitz Foundation envisions a network of LRDs that practice true sustainability. It is a new initiative, and in fact, Monte Azul along with Chumbe Island in Tanzania are the first to be certified. Monte Azul was personally invited to become a founding member during a visit by Jochen Zeitz, renowned for his business acumen and success at Puma. In fact, at first we were quite suspicious to be very frank. We assumed that here was another successful and wealthy individual doing a “feel good” project. We could not have been more mistaken!

We were scrutinized in every aspect of our sustainability practices, and it did not just stop at whether or not we recycled or used bio-degradable soaps. We were impressed by the amount of thought and detail, and at the same time we were not surprised. Mr. Zeitz’s belief in the 4 Cs concept as applied to our situation really opened our eyes. The 4 Cs are Community, Conservation, Culture and Commerce. In order for a business to be successful and sustainable for the long run, it must be successful in each of these areas in equal amounts.

The Zeitz Foundation and Long Run Destination initiative also stood out with their commitment to advise its members with a group of specialists in each of the four categories, suddenly Monte Azul had a panel of expertise from which to benefit, but it did not stop there. The foundation also awards funds for community and conservation projects, with Monte Azul winning on behalf of our community of Chimirol, a \$25,000 grant to start a water filtering program in our area.





One of Monte Azul's frog neighbors. Best picture ever? Credit: Jonathan Finkelstein

What are some environmental projects at Monte Azul that you'd like to do in the future? What will Monte Azul be like in 50 years?

Monte Azul is located in an important water shed area. There is no centralized water treatment plant in this part of Costa Rica. With the seed money from the Zeitz Foundation, we envision a system of biojardineras, or artificial wetlands, installed throughout the community to protect not just the quality of water but also to help control erosion and unnecessary sedimentation of the rivers and the ocean.

If we are allowed to dream here, we envision a private foundation dedicated to environmental protection and fostering sustainable businesses for our community's economic sustainability.

In 50 years I would like to think that Monte Azul has evolved and adapted to the challenges the future may bring. I hope it would remain a place that inspires not just artists, but all our guests to strive for the best they can be, trying new things and learning to strive for excellence as opposed to perfection.

Why is being greener worth the extra work/expense?

Because the future is an inevitable fact, it will be here and we must be prepared, not just for ourselves, but for upcoming generations. The Earth is a magnificent place and I think it's not enough to just avoid damaging it, people need to make an effort to improve it.

As a business practicing sustainability at every possible opportunity, we believe we are ensuring our own success while contributing the success of our community. As our community thrives, so does our business. By maintaining a mindset that places a bigger value over longevity rather than short-term gains, we believe a business will naturally become sustainable. No current resource is infinite so it is only logical to take a long-term approach to managing what is within our means.

In becoming resourceful with our limited resources, we have found that we actually raise our standards of quality rather than not. We have many examples to show and have learned that instead of becoming a burden, sustainability is ensuring our own success.

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