

EXPLORING ☀️ COSTA RICA

Nature Lovers' Retreat Springs from Southern Zone Mountains

By Ann Antkiw

Special to The Tico Times

Take an artist's palette. Mix the verdant greens of the forest, the vivid colors of the tropical flora and the blue of the mountains beyond. Then add comfort, tranquility, compatibility with nature, culture and fine art. Now name your canvas "Monte Azul."

This unique owner-operated getaway for lovers of nature is located in the Southern Zone, 30 minutes' drive from San Isidro de El General, in the small village of Chimirol de Rivas. Costa Rican Carlos Rojas, a native of Cartago, east of San José, and his partner Randall Langendorfer from the U.S. city of San Francisco, purchased the 48-hectare property two years ago. Since then they have set aside 90% of the mid-elevation forest, originally a dairy farm, as a nature preserve. "Monte Azul is a lifelong dream come



An Aesthete's Haven: Above, art is everywhere at Monte Azul, a hotel, gallery and studio in the Southern Zone community of Chimirol de Rivas. Center, individually designed cottages feature locally made cedar furnishings, imported mattresses and down-filled comforters. Top right, cottage terraces lead out to beautifully landscaped gardens. Bottom right, each cottage is also a gallery, this one featuring the work of Tico artist Alvaro Gómez. Photos by Vicky Longland | Tico Times



Getting There, Rates, Info

By car, take the Inter-American Highway south from San José to San Isidro de El General, about three hours. Just south of town, after the bridge, take the steep uphill turnoff on the left marked by a small sign for San Gerardo and Talari Mountain Lodge. Continue 10 km to Rivas.

At the end of the paved road in Rivas, 100 meters beyond the church, follow the sign to Chirripó National Park on the right. Continue 5 km along the dirt road to Chimirol de Rivas School on your right. Pass the church on the left and the Bar Las Palmas. Approximately 1 km after the bar, turn right at the second bus shelter. There's a sign with a "MA" logo. Cross the bridge and the main entrance is on your left. The dirt road after Rivas is rough and bumpy, but four-wheel drive isn't necessary.

Buses leave San José for San Isidro every hour from 5:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. (MUSOC, 222-2422). A local bus connects to Rivas, or you can take a taxi.

The rate for double occupancy, including taxes and breakfast, is \$192. The package rate for double occupancy, including taxes, breakfast, lunch and dinner, is \$279. Smoking is prohibited on the property, as it has been designated a totally smoke-free environment.

For information or reservations, call 742-5333, e-mail info@monteazulcr.com or visit www.monteazulcr.com.



Roy Arguedas Arias | Tico Times

true," Rojas said. "Our many-faceted project opened last year and is committed to promoting sustainability through environmentally friendly practices, while providing guests an opportunity to relax in the utmost comfort, surrounded by nature."

"We also offer a retreat for artists and writers (see separate story) and collaborate with the local community through educational and

economic enterprises," Langendorfer added.

The hotel's accommodations consist of four private, spacious cottages painted in tones of terracotta, orange, yellow, green and sky-blue. The outdoor terraces overlook a stunningly landscaped garden replete with a profusion of tropical plants, including gloriously scented ylang-ylang trees. Accessed by rustic bridges spanning a gurgling stream, each cottage enjoys its own private garden area, which ends on the bank overlooking the magnificent, crystal-clear Río Chirripó. The sound of its turbulent water reverberates throughout the property as it thunders down the valley.

Each cottage offers 515 square feet of beautifully tiled living space.

"I laid every tile myself. It was extremely hard on the knees," Langendorfer said with a chuckle.

He also designed the cottages and cedar furnishings, which were made locally. Imported deluxe mattresses, crisp linens, down-filled tropical-weight comforters, distinctive lighting, floral arrangements, a spacious bathroom and a fully equipped, modern kitchen contribute to the comfort of an elegant home.

But that's not all; each cottage is a private gallery space, and the walls are covered with original works of art by Costa Rican artists. Many of the works were inspired by the surroundings at Monte Azul, and some were painted onsite. A catalog in the room provides information about the artists and prices of the works.

Monte Azul offers two options: accommodation including breakfast, which gives you the opportunity to cook for yourself or try the area eateries; and a full package including

three meals served on the terrace of Café Blue, or you can request room service and dine in the privacy of your cottage.

Chef Donald Segura concocts some delicious, attractively presented meals using local and organic produce. On the menu are an exceptional fresh tomato soup, locally farmed tilapia, appetizers made from neighbors Katia and Wilber's goat cheese, and Swiss-style cheeses by Tatiana and Evan. You

can visit these cheese makers and take some home with you.

Lunches are a simple affair and include pasta, salads and jumbo shrimp. Breakfast is accompanied by homegrown, fresh organic coffee, and special dietary needs can be catered to. The house wine, South African Two Oceans, is available by the glass or bottle. Hotel manager Adrián Alvarado and Heidy Martínez, who waits at table, are both

from the area. They speak English and have been trained to make your stay a pleasurable experience.

For those who wish to do more than relax with a good book, Monte Azul offers many options. The ideal climate means cool nights for sleeping and lovely days for hiking on the property's private trails. Guests can also enjoy birdwatching, horseback riding, soaking in the nearby hot springs, exploring

Chirripó National Park and, for the physically fit, scaling Mt. Chirripó, Costa Rica's highest mountain at 3,820 meters (12,530 feet). Art, paper-making and culinary classes are offered, and avid birdwatchers can visit the late Alexander Skutch's homestead, where he lived and wrote "A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica."

All yearnings are attended to at this delightful retreat for lovers of art and nature. ■

Monte Azul Nurtures Art in Southern Zone

By Ann Antkiw

Special to The Tico Times

Not only is the Southern Zone's Monte Azul dedicated to sharing the beauty of its environment with guests (see separate story), it is also committed to the arts and promoting the rich diversity and talent of contemporary Tico artists, both emerging and established.

Along a jungle path, a short walk from the hotel, you will find Monte Azul's second venture: a forest hideaway and ecofriendly retreat and studio, where a large body of work is produced under the name of Monte Azul Fine Art, Gráfica and Press.

Carlos Rojas, co-owner and chief curator, brings to this new enterprise more than 20 years of experience in the art world, having earned an international reputation as an artist, curator and gallery owner. Since 1990, he has served an international clientele as an independent consultant and art dealer.

Randall Langendorfer left the corporate world of marketing in 2001 to put his energy into what he really enjoyed: printmaking,



Vicky Longland | Tico Times

In the Studio: Carlos Rojas with his restored 1978 Griffin etching press at Monte Azul Gráfica.

interior design, home restoration and landscape gardening. He now uses these talents daily at Monte Azul.

The exceptional team is planning to open a gallery this year in the United States, in New York's Gramercy Park area, where they will represent an eclectic group of artists.

Working in different media with their own innovative styles, Costa Rican artists such as Alvaro Gómez, Ileana Moya, Paulina Ortiz and Karla Solano will have an opportunity to exhibit their work in the United States and beyond.

Monte Azul Gráfica is committed to the arts, while preserving the natural setting of the studio and surrounding property. It produces original fine-art screen prints, which are completely handcrafted using environmentally friendly methods: water-based inks, recycled paper – often made from fibers gathered off the forest floor – organic and non-toxic cleaning agents, and recycled or waste wood for frame making. The huge, light, exceptionally designed studio nestled in the forest is equipped with a beautifully restored, imported 1978 Griffin etching press.

Rojas is the principal designer for the Costa Rican series and many of the limited editions of silk-screen prints at Monte Azul Gráfica. Each screen print is handmade by Rojas, whose works depict the multicolored flora, fauna and landscapes of Costa Rica. The colors are built up one at a time, making

this a slow and labor-intensive process. The final result is a charming, beautifully crafted work of art.

Langendorfer, with a natural talent for color and design, also excels at screen printing, and his works are now part of the limited-edition series at Monte Azul Gráfica. He is also in charge of production at the studio and prints all the designs.

Monte Azul's Artist in Residence Program offers an artist or writer the opportunity to work on the premises. The program includes the use of a private cottage and, for artists, the graphic studio. Residency is by invitation. This year, Monte Azul will announce a juried selection for its 2009 Artist in Residence Program.

Visiting artist workshops are more frequent, with participants selected by similar means as for the resident artist program. The visiting artists conduct workshops, lectures and seminars, as well as work one-on-one with others.

For more information, call 742-5222, e-mail info@monteazulcr.com or visit www.monteazulcr.com. ■

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