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Photos by Tim Street-Porter

VERY STATELY

PLEASURE DOME



Sir James Goldsmith's Mexican eco-sanctuary is open for business



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PLEASURE DOME IS,

by definition, a monumental testament to one man's perseverance, purse, power and even madness. It is often a folly that defies time, the tired and temporal. But while you can read about Kubla Khan's Xanadu pad in Coleridge's poem, visit mad King Ludwig II's 19th-century Neuschwanstein in Bavaria (the model for Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle) or tour William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon, the only pleasure dome you can actually check in to is Cuixmala, or "Soul Haven," the 2,000-acre estate on Mexico's Costa Alegre that was built by Sir James Goldsmith, the Anglo-French billionaire who died of a heart attack at age 64 in 1997.

Cuixmala's story begins a decade earlier. In 1987 Sir Jimmy, not satisfied with multiple homes on multiple continents, did his pleasure dome decree. Having accumulated approximately 20,000 acres on Mexico's rugged, remote, achingly beautiful Pacific coast between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, Goldsmith hired Parisian-born, New York-based designer Robert Couturier to build him not a house or estate but a mini universe—a solar system of villas and outbuildings to accommodate a wife, an ex-wife, their children and an army of servants, tutors, biologists, secretaries and pilots. These satellites—if that is indeed the correct term for a 25,000-square-foot beachfront abode; a 15,000-square-foot guest complex with views of lakes, rivers, mountains and a dormant volcano; as well as two



Previous spread, left: The former pleasure palace of billionaire Sir James Goldsmith, Cuixmala rests on Mexico's Pacific coast between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo. Right: One of the estate's many structures available for rent. La Loma's interior courtyard and tiled dome evoke Moorish architecture.

Opposite page, below: A double staircase with 200 steps leads to La Loma's private seaside swimming pool.

Center and left: Different views of Casa la Playa's swimming pool reveal a blue pool, ocean and sky. Designer Robert Couturier chose a checkered pattern for the pool so as not to leave the large space bare. The tiles came from Guarejato, a small Mexican town known for its tile and pottery.

additional commodious houses—would in turn revolve around La Loma, a 60,000-square-foot Moorish-Mughal supernova high on a cliff that housed Goldsmith, his long-time mistress and their children.

"Jimmy represents a male fantasy. He did what other men never did, couldn't do or never allowed themselves to do. He was like someone from another time—a king, an emperor, a sultan," says Couturier, who spent upward of 15 years working on assorted Goldsmith properties: a New York townhouse, a 1640 chateau in Burgundy, a Spanish Colonial hacienda also in Mexico, and even a private Boeing 757.

Construction on Cuixmala commenced in January 1988. Created as an amalgam of exotic styles, it was to be imposing but not overwhelming, and it became, according to Couturier, "a direct parallel to what was in Jimmy's mind: a castle." Not the dark and dank European variety, nor a New World Mayan temple, but a fantastical palace with swimming pools and dependent buildings, a brilliant Versailles surrounded by an equally vivid jungle in lieu of a walled park, all under a hot tropical sun.

With a labor force of over 2,000 and a budget, as Couturier puts it, of "many scores of millions," the property was finished soup to nuts (or in this case, poured concrete to porcelain) in a mere two years. "Many architectural and decorative elements, as well as furnishings and objects, came from India and Europe. When all these pieces were finished, Jimmy rented an enormous cargo plane and we picked everything up at one time," says Couturier, describing convenience shopping at its most glamorous. Not that this wingspan made flights of design fancy any easier. All the latticed windows, *jalis* of traditional India designs, were made of sandstone or wood in Rajasthan and had to be fitted into frames built on-site from white oak trees felled on Goldsmith's properties in the United States.

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While such complicated precision has a price in sweat and labor, the overall result is unadulterated pleasure. The buildings are sybaritically comfortable (Goldsmith employed two full-time sewers to tend and maintain more than 1,300 silk pillows made from Indian saris that were strewn across sofas and armchairs). But what makes Cuixmala extraordinary is the contrast between the luxe lodgings and their setting. "The wildness of the terrain feels even more wild juxtaposed with the refinement of the houses, and vice versa," says Couturier.

That setting—the land—was much more than mere backdrop or stage set to Goldsmith, an early environmentalist and eco-warrior who, in conjunction with the National University of Mexico, founded the Chamela-Cuixmala Biosphere, a 32,473-acre reserve that surrounds the property. From the outset, the estate was green in philosophy as well as foliage, emphasizing recycled materials, organic estate-grown foods and an absence of air conditioners, rendered redundant by thick walls and high ceilings. Goldsmith planted a coconut plantation of 10,000 trees and imported zebras, gazelles and ocelots as well as biologists to study the biosphere's indigenous 1,200 species of plants and trees, 270 kinds of birds, rare reptiles and endangered jaguars.



Opposite page: La Loma's outdoor dining palapa is about 30 feet in diameter and constructed from palm fronds collected around the estate and woven together on a full moon to ward-off scorpions—a local tradition that has proven effective.

This page, above: The embellished doors leading from the indoor living area to the outdoor dining palapa were made in Rajasthan and imported on Goldsmith's private jet.

This page, below: An outdoor dining terrace for the casitas overlooks an animal park and jungle.



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Thus was Goldsmith's pleasure dome defined. And thus, by and large, does the pleasure dome remain. "Life on the property is the same as it was while my father was alive," says Sir James' daughter, Alix Goldsmith Marcaccini, who, along with her husband and children, lives on the estate and has overseen its conversion from wholly private domain to one that offers its houses—from La Loma to the charming quarters once occupied by tutors and pilots—for rent. "There are the same rituals: margaritas, riding on the beach or lagoon boat rides at sunset, protecting baby turtles on their way to the sea after sunset, or morning visits to the exotic animal farm to see the baby zebras," she says. There are also the same silk cushions, quality of linens and largely organic table that existed before 1997. The staff now numbers around 220 as opposed to 400, but the attrition is more from the no-longer-necessary brigades of business advisers and secretaries. In terms of service and maintenance, La Loma alone commands the attention of four waiters, five cleaning women, two cooks, three gardeners, three laundresses and two pool attendants.

"We all decided to rent the houses three years ago, and started doing so by word of mouth," says Marcaccini. A family decision was necessary because, while trusts were set up to maintain the estate's land, the houses were left to individual family members, none of whom, save for Marcaccini and her immediate family, lives at Cuixmala full time. So although there are occasional periods of unavailability when family descends, those times are infrequent and, because the extended clan tends not to come all at once, an alternate villa or pavilion or suite is almost always a possibility. [Continued on page 124]



Opposite page, above: La Loma's dining room includes Indian rams-head dining chairs and can seat 48 people. Center: To accommodate Goldsmith's height—and match his larger-than-life personality—rooms were kept large-scale, including the master bedroom where the 8-by-8-foot bed faces the sea.

This page, above: The sitting room features exaggerated Moorish arches and built-in furniture that weathers well in the climate. To add color, most pieces are covered in silk saris. Below: Light filters through the many Indian jalis in the master bed, casting patterns on the white plaster and marble.