

MEXICO

# Wealthy man's Shangri La comes with an ecological twist

A flamboyant tycoon's legacy offers sustainably green getaways amid grandiose luxury, all at a hefty price

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN



Cuixmala is home to a small, gated exotic animal sanctuary that hosts zebras, eland, black buck antelope and other imported creatures.

Fancy your own patch of paradise? So did a very wealthy man called Sir Jimmy, who once acquired a huge tract of virgin jungle on Mexico's untamed Costalegre, which stretches along the Pacific coast from Manzanillo to Puerto Vallarta. He then transformed part of it into a lush private playground for him and his jet-setting pals.

It took Sir Jimmy two years and two thousand workers to build a magnificent domed Moorish beachfront castle, followed by three posh guest villas. Then he stocked his Garden of Eden with herds of zebra, gazelle and eland, wild boar, ring-tailed coati and other exotic creatures, along with horses to ride. Finally, this one-time corporate raider had his new realm declared an ecological reserve, thereby protecting a vast array of flora and fauna — from sea turtles and crocodiles to jaguars, pumas and parrots — for generations to come.

Today, three decades after controversial Franco-British billionaire tycoon turned politician and environmental activist Sir James Goldsmith created his own private jungle estate called Cuixmala (which means 'the soul's resting place'), one of the world's most alluring tropical getaways remains a well-kept secret.

"Cuixmala is the essential 'non' resort and we are really trying to maintain that feeling of a family property," explains Goldsmith's daughter, Alix Marceacini, who, along with her husband, Goffredo, is custodian of her late father's magnificent obsession.

The Goldsmith family's holdings here also include a sister property, Hacienda de San Antonio, a meticulously restored coffee plantation near an active volcano about three hours' drive inland, near Colima.

## Castles in the sand

Nothing reflects Goldsmith's grandiose vision more than La Loma, Cuixmala's palatial, pink and white Moorish inspired main villa designed by French architect Robert Couturier. Once Sir Jimmy's private abode, this 37,000-square-foot, four bedroom architectural fairy tale is guarded by life-size bronze statues of a rhino, a gorilla and an elephant, and topped by a blue-and-yellow dome.

Moroccan, Mexican and Mediterranean styles merge seamlessly in La Loma's gigantic cool-white, art-strewn, rooms with arched ceilings so high as to be an agoraphobic's nightmare.

Surrounding La Loma are six equally luxurious satellite bungalows which, booked together with La Loma, will set you back, depending on the season, a mere ten to sixteen grand U.S. a night, not including meals. Stretching beneath them are kilometres of some of Mexico's most unspoiled beaches, great swaths of jungle wilderness, crocodile friendly lagoons, a coconut plantation, and an organic farm.

Along with La Loma and Cuixmala's two other villas, Alborada is staffed with butlers, chefs, maids, waiters and gardeners. All are distinct in design, but share a common trait — absolute privacy. You could happily spend an entire vacation in one of them, soaking up the sumptuous decor, indulging in poolside massages, and dining on gourmet meals prepared using organic produce from Cuixmala and the ranch at Hacienda de San Antonio in the Mexican highlands.

Cuixmala's self-contained bioreserve has so much to explore. And this exclusive tropical playground is just a small part of Sir Jimmy's greatest gift to the world — the 10,000 hectare Chamela-Cuixmala Biosphere Reserve that he established in 1993 to protect the habitat for over 1,200 species of plants, 72 species of mammals, 270 species of birds and innumerable species of reptiles and amphibians, including the rare and venomous Mexican bearded lizard.

Opt to explore Cuixmala's jungles on a mountain bike, wander its unspoiled beaches, watch snowy egrets, great blue herons, and yellow-footed boobies soar overhead from a boat on its tranquil lagoon, and admire herds of skittish zebra and the elegant white tailed deer.

But what most impresses me is Cuixmala's beachfront sea turtle sanctuary, where eggs from over a hundred nest are collected by resident biologists and protected from predators until they hatch. In the evenings, guests are invited to help launch hours-old baby turtles into the sea, helping to give them a fighting chance to survive and return here one day and lay their own eggs.

Sir Jimmy would have been pleased to know that visitors to his grand experiment in holistically sustainable living in the Mexican jungle are still able to appreciate the original method to Cuixmala's magic.

## If you go

**Getting there:** Cuixmala is located on Mexico's Pacific coast, located about 150 kilometres south of Puerto Vallarta. Hacienda de San Antonio is three hours' drive inland from Cuixmala, which is located near Manzanillo.

Air Canada, WestJet and a number of charter airlines provide regular airline service to both cities from November to April. Private car transfers can be arranged.

**Cuixmala:** Guests can book either La Loma (which is the main house), one of four private villas, or any of nine casitas. Revenue helps underwrite the work of the Cuixmala Ecological Foundation. From \$400 US for a one-bedroom casita; \$2,200 for a four-bedroom villa, and \$10,000 for La Loma. Casita rates include breakfast; additional meals are \$95 a person a day. In villas, meals are \$140 each a day. Each villa comes with a full complement of staff.

For further information, call 866-516-2611 or 52-312/314-3143, or visit [www.cuixmala.com](http://www.cuixmala.com).

**Hacienda de San Antonio:** Jimmy Goldsmith's other Mexican mansion, set in the shadow of an active volcano, has 26 lavish guest rooms. From \$700 US. For more information, call 866-516-2611 or 52-312/314-3143 or visit [www.haciendadesanantonio.com](http://www.haciendadesanantonio.com).

**Chamela-Cuixmala Biosphere Reserve:** The first in Mexico to conserve tropical dry forest, this 13,142 hectare reserve hosts one of the highest concentrations of endemic species in the country, including endangered marine turtles; [www.ecocuixmala.org](http://www.ecocuixmala.org).

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