

Sustainable living



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BY ROSALYNN POH

Finca Bellavista — a sustainable tree house community in Costa Rica

If you're a *Star Wars* fan, you may have wondered what life would be like in an Ewok village — living in tree houses, where a combination of rope ladders, swinging vines and wooden catwalks are used to bring you from one tree to another.

An adventurous American couple, Matt and Erica Hogan, have embarked on a challenging and exciting journey to do just that — build an Ewok-like village called Finca Bellavista. It is located at the base of a rainforest mountain on the Southern Pacific Coast of Costa Rica bordered to the north by Rio Piedras Blancas and the south by Rio Bellavista. Yes, they have created a community of eco-friendly homes in the treetops called Finca Bellavista (which means "beautiful view ranch" in Spanish). Erica says Finca Bellavista is named after Rio Bellavista, which flows through the middle of the community.

The couple first bought 62 acres of forest there in 2006 and have continued to acquire more land. They now own about 350 acres. In an email interview, Erica Hogan tells *City & Country* how it all began.

What was life like before Finca Bellavista? "Gee, was there life before Finca Bellavista? I am beginning to wonder! Ok, just kidding. Matt went to Costa Rica with friends on a surf trip, fell in love with the vibe of South America, and called me to ask if I wanted to come and check

out the area to maybe buy another fixer-upper or something small where we can enjoy our 'off seasons'. The rest is history," she says.

At the time, the Hogans were based in Crested Butte, Colorado. Erica was an associate editor with a community newspaper, while Matt co-owned a roofing distribution company that focused on manufacturing materials with recycled products.

It was rather difficult to imagine a tree house community, more so the size of 350 acres. Erica agrees: "Neither did we! The 62 acres we initially bought was marketed as a timber harvest site, and we became motivated to save it from that fate (it was already a secondary growth forest). How we were going to do that was beyond us.

"So, we started brainstorming ideas ... maybe we should build a tree house since there are some awesome big trees here. Maybe our friends would want to build tree houses too, and wouldn't it be cool to connect them with zip lines and bridges and make our own little tree house community like an Ewok village? I'm the dreamer, Matt's the doer, and he took one look at me and said, 'Let's do it!'" she recalls.

Matt then started researching and realised 'it' had never really been done before ('it' being a modern tree house community).

"We are young, we don't have children, and wouldn't it be great to look back and say we

created something that was life-changing for us and for others? Not to mention building the most unique and amazing neighborhood in the world?" she adds.

Once the neighbouring landowners understood what they wanted to do and that they weren't going to bulldoze the mountainside and create a typical *gringo* (Spanish slang for white man) subdivision/community, they were eager to sell their parcels to the couple. "We ended up buying a whole peninsula of rainforest and more. We wanted to begin by protecting our water and view sheds, so two whitewater rivers created boundaries for the most part," she says.

The Hogans are still in the process of negotiating for and purchasing adjacent parcels of land. When asked how many acres in total so far, Erica initially says: "We could add them all up, but to be honest, I'm kind of scared to. The important thing to us is that we don't have any loans taken out for the land ... it's paid for and the project will never be taken away by a bank or succumb to the whims of a financier. It was really important to us to try and maintain creative control over what we and our owners want here, and that would be considerably more difficult with someone else financing it."

"Basically, people buy a parcel from us. We have 26 pages of guidelines that explain what types of structures are allowed here, but in gen-

eral, they must be arboreal or stilt-built (to allow terrestrial movement of animals and to lessen the ground disturbance area), utilise a rainwater catch or natural springs for water, tie into our future electrical grid (which will be hydropower) and use biodigestors to process waste.

Once someone buys a parcel, an arborist inspects and chooses the right trees for building a tree house.

"We wouldn't put up a tree that typically has a life span of 15 years, for instance. When the arborist assess trees for suitability to house a structure, he looks at aspects such as the age of the tree, typical life span, root structure, strength, damage and how it typically grows (out or up)," she explains.

"Our arborist Gerardo assesses the trees, then tags the ones that are good to host a home (there can be anywhere from zero to 20 on a parcel). The owner comes to get a feel for where those trees are and begins to hone in on trees they are most interested in. Once they decide on a set of trees, Gerardo comes back to inspect the trees closely. He looks for things like root support/structure, whether there is insect damage or rot, how far along the tree is in its life expectancy and so on. Then, the creative and designing process begins."

Finca Bellavista initially comprised 72 parcels of two to four acres, to be developed in three

Q&A with Erica Hogan

City & Country: Did you ever envision that you were going to build a tree house community?

Erica: If you had told me four years ago that this is what I would be doing, I would have laughed. But life can change quickly! I really, truly feel we were meant to see this property, and some type of divine intervention led us to imagine and dream up the idea. If we had not seen this place, we would not have thought about building tree houses here. There is nowhere else in the world that would work better than this. If there is another place that exists that is this perfect, I don't know if we would ever be able to find it.

How long did it take to conceptualise the whole idea?

In reality, four years, until May 2010. It hasn't stopped yet. There are new ideas every day that we want to implement, and we have a lot of creative owners and friends who provide ideas and feedback. If we had limitless funding, you could not even imagine the things that we would do here. I have lists all over the house, so does Matt. We draw inspiration from travelling, seeing unusual things, watching movies, and it just snowballs into more ideas.

Were you nervous about the response from people?

Very. We had no idea what to expect. I have learned over the last two years that waking up every morning with no expectations is a much safer way to live in such a dynamic environment. First, we weren't developers. Second, no one had ever done this before. We expected Phase 1 (30 parcels) to take three to five years to sell. Within a year, we had sold those and moved here to start work on the 'little project'.

Is it difficult as a foreigner to own property in Costa Rica?

Nope. We encourage our owners to create a *sociedad anonima* (SA), which works kind of like a public limited company anywhere else in the world. The SA is basically a shelf corporation that an owner holds the property in for liability purposes. All our parcels are titled and deeded

too, and US or Costa Rican citizens have the same land ownership rights in Costa Rica.

Who are your purchasers so far?

Our owners run the gamut of age and occupation. We have 20-somethings that have never bought property before to 60-somethings looking for an active retirement home. The majority of our owners are in their 30s and 40s, many have children of varying ages, some are single. Most are from the US and Canada but we are starting to get a broader interest within Latin America and Europe. Quite a few have intentions to live here full-time, but expect to phase in part-time here while figuring out family, work and life obligations elsewhere. Many are interested in starting a summer home school cooperative programme, where they would come with their kids and be here for the summer, and join forces with other parents to teach and learn about rainforest ecology, practise Spanish, art, music ... all kinds of different things.

How would you best describe yourself and Matt? Risk takers or environmentalists?

Fairly young, relatively energetic and willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the project and our employees. Our days can entail many things that vary from leading tours to sitting in meetings with the municipality to building trails to driving people to and from the airport to meal planning and cooking. Risk takers or environmentalists? Both. We have risked everything for this project, our financial stability, our marriage, our lifestyles, having children. We have learned a second language, lived outside of our comfort zones in tents and in the mud with no running water or electricity and not taken pay cheques for three years and counting, for the sake of doing something different, to explore a new frontier in living, and to change the fate of a piece of rainforest, a handful of lives and the surrounding community forever.

SILKE GANDOLF



Top: Zip lines are used as a way to connect one tree house to another.



Right: Matt and Erica bought 62 acres of forest in 2006. They now own about 350 acres.



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Some of the tree houses in Finca Bellavista

phases. They expected the first phase, comprising 30 parcels, to take three to five years to sell but they were sold out within a year. The couple then moved to Costa Rica to begin work on the project. In its second phase, parcels ranged from two to three acres and priced from US\$49,000 (RM150,000) to US\$65,000. Building costs are separate.

Subsequently, the Hogans decided to create smaller parcels as they realised that most owners were overwhelmed with the idea of a tree home on two acres of trees. They are in the process of dividing some into ¼-acre and ½-acre parcels, and once done, there will be over 100 parcels.

Tree houses are like snowflakes, no two are alike, Erica says. "We encourage multiple, smaller structures. Square footage can be a state of mind, and I am convinced that smaller is better, for tree houses especially!" she adds. The Hogans' own tree house is called El Castillo Mastate (Mastate is a canopy giant tree) and it is supported on one gigantic tree — nearly 61m tall with a circumference of 3.7m. She says most of the heavier elements of the house are in the stilt-built structure. El Castillo Mastate has two levels, with two bathrooms and one bath, for a total of 1,200 sq ft including the outdoor deck (interior living space is about 500 sq ft).

A tree house can either be designed and built by the owner or by an in-house construction company that can manage and implement construction projects for owners. "Tree and stilt-built houses can vary greatly in price and go as high in price as imagination and budgets will allow. But, we could do a stilt-built for as little as US\$25,000 and we just finished a tree house (with very tricky engineering that required a lot of outside expertise) for US\$150,000. Our own tree house cost US\$80,000. One thing to remember is that our structures are relatively simple. Our house has screens and is relatively open-air, with no need for air-conditioning or heating. We have to shade rain, not support snowloads, and so on. Tropical architecture is much more open and ambient," she says.

Owners are encouraged to be involved in the building process. All designs have to be submitted to an in-house Environmental Review Board, which assesses things like tree attachments, access, building materials, feasibility and so on.

"Once a home is built, owners can choose to add their unit to be managed by our property management company, and we can rent their

homes out for them, especially if they plan on being here only a portion of the year."

She says the idea to live in a tree house appeals to nearly everyone "whether you are 6 or 60, you've at least thought of it at some point, but people think it's unrealistic when actually it is very simple and organic.

"We are making it possible in a beautiful place within a communal setting. The cost is certainly an element. We are a fraction of the price of a traditional community. All of our owners (so far) have used means such as savings, personal loans, equity lines or credit cards to purchase land from us. No one to our knowledge has taken out a traditional mortgage to finance their properties here. I think people are searching for something different, something fun, some place special to share with their loved ones.

"I think a lot of people can relate and trust us as we aren't 'developers' in the traditional sense of the word — just two relatively normal people that took on something different and implemented it. This is our dream and our home, and we share it with people. Our office is in our house currently, and people are in and out all day, whether we are in a meeting, in a bathrobe, making breakfast while on a conference call, or scratching the dog's belly. It might not be the most professional of situations, but we are real people trying to make something work. We are open and transparent about any problem we have had at the risk of losing an owner's trust or a potential sale. But we can sleep at night and we always go with our hearts when making decisions.

"I really feel like conventional lifestyles are now filled with so many pitfalls from commuting to jobs to unfulfilling careers only to pay for things that we don't need, to dependence on things that are out of our direct control (politics, how food is made and distributed, and health-care decisions, to name a few). I think there are some people who are really discontent in such lifestyles for obvious reasons, and are ready to make a life change. We have some owners that have had life changes (whether divorce, illness, losing a job or a loved one) that have motivated them to find a more nurturing environment to spend their time, energy and money," she says.

Finca Bellavista is truly a dream that has turned into an exciting alternative to a typical living environment. **E**

