

El Castillo Mastate: Treetop Living Defined

By Elise Andrews

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Shawna and K.C. Rudy are really living the high life these days. While the world is still reeling from the economic crisis, the Rudys are venturing into a simpler – and somewhat less conventional – way of living.

The couple from the U.S. city of Dallas, Texas, has gone “out on a limb” to be among the first owners to build a home at Finca Bellavista, a sustainable tree-house community in the Southern Zone, set within the spectacular backdrop of the Pacific coastal mountains. Perched overlooking the Golfo Dulce and nurtured by two rivers, this is a neighborhood like no other on Earth, exemplified by the meandering hiking trails and the wildlife on display in the looming canopy trees. All energy is produced on-site with hydro and solar assets, and the finca’s “base area” includes a community center featuring conventional amenities such as an open-air barbecue and coffee lounge, a bathhouse and communal kitchen and dining area.

If that’s not unusual enough, there’s the transportation network of ziplines and platforms, aka the Sky Trails, the crystal-clear rivers and waterfalls and the all-arboreal nature of the homes that will soon speckle the canopy of this 350-acre planned community.

When justifying their real estate investment to skeptical family members and friends, “Why not a tree house?” is usually the Rudys’ collective answer.

“Building a tree house is definitely ‘out there,’ primarily because it is so unconventional,” K.C. acknowledges. “It takes a certain kind of person to want to live in one, rather than in a timeshare on a beach somewhere. We’d rather be in a tree house, enjoying unspoiled nature around us. For us, it makes perfect sense.”

A herpetologist, K.C.’s passion is studying reptiles and amphibians, and his wife’s is ornithology. The two have found their paradise exploring the finca’s seemingly endless array of critters. However, the couple needn’t venture any farther than the front porch of their new tree home, dubbed El Castillo Mastate, to get a glimpse of canopy life; they are eye-to-eye with it.

From the safety of the solid ground beneath, the Rudys’ master bedroom suite appears superimposed in the highest level of the canopy. K.C. acknowledges that this lofty lair, an octagonal dwelling perched 90 feet up, isn’t for the faint of heart.

“I guess a spirit of adventure does have to be involved,” he says with a laugh.



An 80-foot-long suspension bridge connects the two-level arboreal suite to a stilt-built casita that sits atop a knoll on the forest floor. The casita houses heavier areas such as the kitchen, dining area and bathroom to lighten the load for the host tree, a gigantic mastate that towers 180 feet into the heavens. Hardwood bamboo flooring, custom tile finishes and bright skylights bring comfort and livability to the Rudys’ tree home. And while the sprawling scene looks like something from a storybook describing a home for an Ewok or any number of fantastical forest-dwelling creatures, it is the couple’s dream home, realized.

“There is nothing else like it, anywhere in the world,” K.C. says.

While the thought of hiking to one’s house in this pedestrian-accessed community might seem outrageous to some, others have found exactly what they are looking for at Finca Bellavista. Pose the question, “Who would want to live in a tree house?” and the resounding answer is: apparently lots of people. Singletons, grandparents, 40-somethings and young families, primarily from North America, have invested in the idea of being a part of the world’s first modern, planned, sustainable tree-house community. While the collective bio of Finca Bellavista owners runs the gamut in terms of age, occupation and residency, all of the investors have things in common – and most came here to foster a spirit of adventure and explore a new frontier in living.

“While we were fascinated by the project, it took a while to ‘get’ the concept. It seemed like more of a fantasy than a real place,” K.C. says, noting the like-mindedness of future neighbors he has met so far. Many, like the Rudys, are drawn to the prospect of a simpler, purer lifestyle, in which morning coffee is punctuated with the melody of birdsong and adventure awaits out the back door – nine stories down, of course.

During its early planning stages, El Castillo Mastate was intended to be a staged project, K.C. says. The Rudys had planned on completing the stilt-built casita first and then, as funding and time allowed, added the bridge and tree-house structures.

“Something changed, so that the entire thing, from design to moving in, was finished in about six months,” K.C. says.

Instant gratification aside, he acknowledges that excitement was certainly a component of jumpstarting the process.

The first step, of course, is to select the perfect parcel of land and trees on which to begin envisioning a dream tree home. For the Rudys, this involved stomping around on several lots to get a feel for things such as views, terrain, proximity to waterways, tree size and variety and overall vibe.

After the desired spot of land is pur-



The High Life: El Castillo Mastate is one of the first homes to be built at Finca Bellavista, a sustainable tree-house community in the Southern Zone. Above left, an 80-foot suspension bridge leads from the stilt-built casita to the treetop bedroom suite, pictured at left and bottom. Above right, living and dining area in the casita.

Photos by Matt Hogan

ing a home in this neck of the woods have exponential possibilities.

“Tree houses are like snowflakes; no two are alike,” Finca Bellavista co-founder Matt Hogan says. He observes that designing a tree house in such an environment certainly takes patience, creativity and a flood of ideas from several minds. Eventually, he notes, the process seems to become a matter of ruling out various options. Luckily for the Rudys, their selected parcel had an undeniably perfect location that spoke to them, and helped to manifest their treetop dreams much more quickly than expected.

Acting as the general contractor for the tree home, Hogan assembled what he calls “the A-Team” of builders from a variety of backgrounds and locales to get El Castillo Mastate off the ground. Carpenters from the U.S. state of Colorado and the TreeHouse Workshop near Seattle, Washington, assisted Finca Bellavista’s carpentry crew in bringing this masterpiece to the world.

“My first thought when I saw the site (for El Castillo Mastate) was: ‘How are we gonna do this?’” says Bubba Smith of the TreeHouse Workshop.

Though accustomed to working in the treetops, Smith says the most challenging aspect of this particular build was the sheer amount of climbing and negotiating the tricky scaffolding created to support the construction of the superstructure, which was welded from steel.

“I became a more confident dangler, that’s for sure,” Smith says with a chuckle.

All kidding aside, Hogan now knows the sky is the limit for imagining and creating tree homes in his unique little enclave. He says he is giddy with excitement over brainstorming for the next tree home to be built at Finca Bellavista this spring, and for the future of the community.

“If El Castillo Mastate is any indicator of things to come here, just think of the possibilities,” he says. ■

For more information about Finca Bellavista, visit www.fincabellavista.net or e-mail info@fincabellavista.net.



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