

La Casa Que Canta:

"The House That Sings" a heavenly hideaway . . .

BY THOMAS WILMER

The Mexicana airliner is packed with *madres* and *padres* and their wide-eyed *niños* returning home to Mexico after visiting relations in the north. There are others en route to visit their families in Mexico.

Crusty *campesinos* wear their obligatory white-straw cowboy hats with tassels dangling off the backside of the brim. *Abuelas* and *abuelos* are dressed in their goin'-to-town and Basilica duds – fresh from the rack. *Abuelitas* wear full-length *mamacita* dresses with lace accouterments, while the chivalrous, but reserved, gentlemen are decked out in neatly pressed Levi's, spit-polished cowboy boots and mother-of-pearl snap-button Western shirts, accented with silver-tipped leather bolo ties.

The plane touches down in Guadaluajara. Carry-on bags, parcels and string-tied cardboard boxes laden with goodies from the States are snuggled under the arms of passengers. They step into the terminal and dissipate into the noisy beehive of greeters and arriving and departing travelers. One more hop. An hour later the connecting flight to Zihuatanejo/Xtapa touches down.

The cab from the airport worms its way through downtown Zihuatanejo, and the view through the window reveals that "Zihuat" has changed little in the past decade. This is one of those rare resort towns that has managed to retain its insular ways.

There is not a Señor Frogs, a Carlos and Charlie's or a Planet Hollywood in Zihuatanejo (Xtapa, 20 miles away is the place to go for high-rise international corporate-flag hotels, upscale trendo shops, and jammin'



The ultimate romantic getaway.

discos); locals go casually about their business in Zihuat, frequenting *tien-das* that specialize in functional provisions and necessities. Oh, there are ample T-shirt and trinket shops, especially close to the beach where the vendors are at their make-shift card-table operations and local crafts people selling their wares at El Mercado Artesano. But for the most part, it is groceries, meat markets, fish mongers, pharmacies, *cantinas*, clothing stores, churches and schools that define and best describe downtown Zihuatanejo.

Along the palm-frond-shaded beach-front promenade is a plentitude of seafood eateries, open-air cantinas and fishermen selling their daily catch. The sandy beach, just above the high-tide line, is decorated with dozens of colorful fishing skiffs and punts, while the deep horseshoe-shaped bay, enfolded by steep, rich green hillsides, is packed with large fishing vessels, anchored side by side with luxurious yachts and pleasure craft. During the cruise season, mammoth luxury liners drop anchor further out in the bay. Tenders shuttle cruise passengers to the pier for day-long port-of-call visits before moving on to pollinate Acapulco, Mazatlan, Puerto Vallarta and Cabo.



PHOTOS: WME ASSOCIATES

Brilliantly colored works of art greet guests.

At the northern edge of town, near Playa La Ropa beach, the taxi turns off the main roadway and climbs a short hill to the entry gates of cloistered, cliff-top La Casa Que Canta. Before the cab comes to a complete stop, the hotel's combination greeter, doorman and guard rushes out to open the car door and smiles a warm welcome as he leans inside across the back seat and scoops up the luggage. Escorted through the entryway, the inner side of the high, siennatinged stucco perimeter walls reveals a truly awe-inspiring paradise.

LA CASA QUE CANTA - IT DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER THAN THIS

"I feel like someone just brushed me into the most beautiful impressionistic painting," says Carrie Howard, a guest from Philadelphia, as she and her fiancé Carlos

travel & recreation

Melendez survey the exotic enclave that is La Casa Que Canta. World travelers Lane Munroe and his wife Kristen from Sun Valley, Idaho, add, "In our opinion, the only other place on the planet we've visited that might beat La Casa Que Canta is the to-die-for, ultra-romantic Turtle Island in Fiji."

La Casa Que Canta, a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World, has the enviable distinction of being one of those ultimate resorts that sells itself. Like a perpetual motion machine, guests do the marketing and sales for the enchanting hotel and restaurant, for free – and with gusto. Virtually everyone who comes to stay at the Casa returns home and raves to their friends about their awesome experience. Most guests we met while staying at La Casa Que Canta say they booked their stay on the recommendation of previous guests – friends, acquaintances and travel agents.

This is a resort that is peerless in every aspect – architecture, setting, ambiance, staff attitude, exceptional cuisine, palatial-size grand suites and two mind-blowing swimming pools. A secluded saltwater pool and whirlpool, just inches from the crashing waves, is tucked against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. The isolated, dramatic location is the ideal setting for a romantic moonlit swim. The main pool, set topside, adjacent to the open-air bar, literally hangs over the high cliff edge, 150 feet above the sea. The classic "horizon" or "infinity" pool offers the amazing illusion that one could swim right out into space. The water perpetually cascades over its rimless edge and plunges down the sheer cliff to the Pacific.

This tale of a true rarity in the world of upscale resorts and awesome swimming pools gets better. In the Hollywood movie, *When a Man Loves a Woman*, starring Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia, is a scene that was shot on location at this resort's legendary horizon pool.

The entire segment lasts less than 60 seconds, but what a minute it is. For some reason, the scene is so consummately romantic that more than 2,000 couples have booked



The views are sublime at La Casa Que Canta.

romance getaways at La Casa Que Canta subsequent to viewing the movie (to add to the amazement – one must scroll through the tiny credits at the end of the film to discover the name of the location).

That's how guests, Carrie and Carlos came to stay at the Casa. "As we watched the video, I saw the pool and the awesome setting, and I said to Carlos, 'That's it!'" They booked their getaway that same evening. Carrie says the charisma of La Casa Que Canta dramatically exceeded her most idealistic preconceptions, and she was literally brought to tears one evening as they sat down to dinner. First, a five-piece mariachi band encircled their table, and then Carlos stood up and proceeded to kneel close beside her. You guessed it. Carrie was momentarily stunned as Carlos proposed, and to his great relief, Carrie beamed with a huge smile, and tears, as she responded, "Yes!"

Marc Solakian, a contented guest at the Casa, and co-producer of the Paramount Television series, "Sister-Sister," says, "This special retreat, in every detail, epitomizes what a romantic destination should be." The overall architectural design recalls the Mesa Verde cliff-dweller structures of New Mexico, combined with classical Mexican elements such as adobe bricks and palm-thatched roofs and overhangs. Three separate, cliff-hugging, multi-story guest buildings, Mar, Luna and Sol, are conveniently sited around a grand

palapa structure that houses the reception area, gift shop and covered dining/relaxation space. The sense of place and authenticity is especially evocative under the grand palapa. Open to the elements on two sides, the voluminous palm-thatched roof showcases the expertly assembled, exposed Palo de Brazil (a gnarly mangrove tree indigenous to Central America and South America) posts, beams, rafters and heavy timber columns.

The building exteriors are finished with rough-textured, rich, burnt sienna-colored stucco with the added touch of randomly embedded straw (providing the illusion of the entire structure being built of adobe bricks). The architects furthered this engaging fantasy by building low planter walls of real adobes and exfoliating the stucco to expose the traditional mud and straw bricks.

Each guest suite, named after a traditional Mexican song, is equally scintillating with artistic and sophisticated characteristics. Outstanding elements include hand-painted tiles and hand-crafted traditional Mexican furnishings from the state of Michoacan that respectfully recall the design elements of internationally renowned Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. The furniture is intricately accented with colorful hand-painted flowers, parrots, mermaids, monkeys and other authentic ethnic motifs.

As guests first step into their suite, they are welcomed by an incredibly embellished and brilliantly colored work of art that appears to be embroidered onto the duvet bedspread. It usually takes a few moments to realize that this aesthetic masterpiece is actually constructed of freshly picked flower petals and dainty green sprigs (in addition to masterfully performing their housekeeping duties, the maids are also incredibly accomplished artists, and our being forced to destroy their painstaking creations, in order to climb into bed, remains our one and only regretful experience during our stay at La Casa Que Canta). Every evening during their turndown service, the maids leave a new, original

PHOTOS: THOMAS WILMER

