

Fantasy garden legacy of dreamer

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1940s and created a surrealist's dream in the botanical garden of Las Pozas. His creation and the flamboyant lifestyle he lived here, drawing international attention and visits from the likes of Salvador Dali, have left an indelible mark on this town, which still draws visitors from around the world.

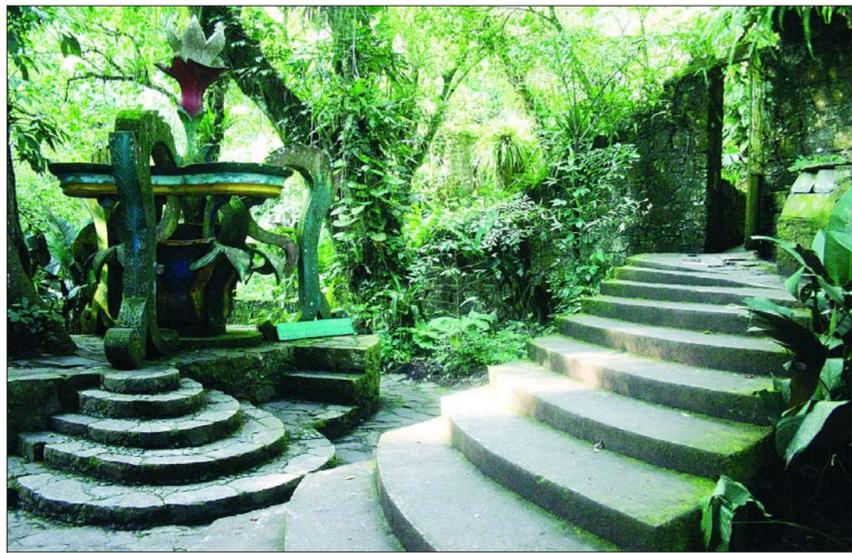
Part creative genius, part childlike whimsy, part drug-induced madness, the garden is shrouded in mystery. Wandering its misty paths, however, I venture to conclude that one thing is certain: There is no place remotely like this anywhere on Earth.

It took 35 years to construct, with 150 workmen at its height, filling the concrete molds and erecting the wild constructions that bloomed in James' fecund imagination throughout the 80-acre garden. Constructions with names as fanciful as the structures themselves: the House With a Roof Like a Whale, Temple of the Ducks, the House With Three Stories That Might be Five, the Fleur-de-Lys Bridge. Visitors had to pass sideways through a narrow passage that led to three Romanesque arches called St. Peter and St. Paul Gate — and then through an ornate wrought-iron gate topped with the Eye of the Buddha, which he was said to have placed there to ascertain the intentions of those who entered. The place has an oddly interrupted feel, however, as though the builder had fallen down some rabbit hole and revisited years later to find everything covered in green moss.

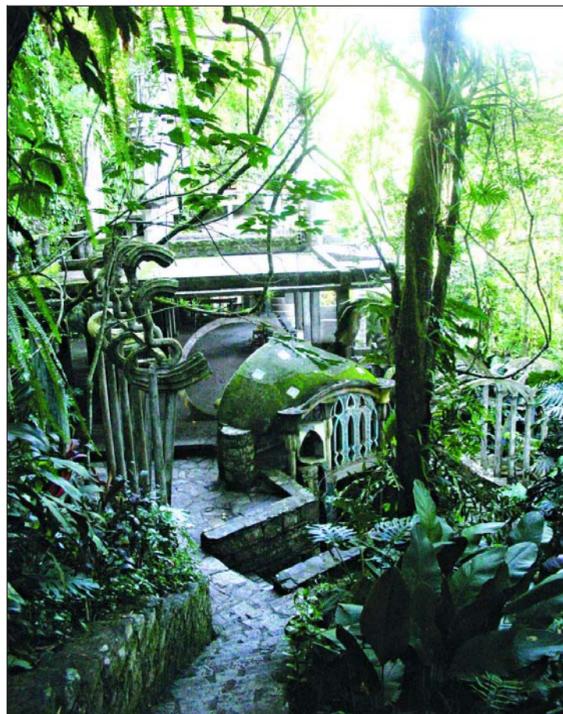
James himself could have been a character in a Lewis Carroll novel. One imagines him at the height of his creative fervor, seated in the blue bathtub with his white beard and Buddha belly, surrounded by an elevated water garden that overlooks the waterfall pool, exchanging ideas with his best friend and right-hand man, Plutarco Gastélum. Or hanging out in the bamboo palace, sharing a mind-bending moment with Dali or Pablo Picasso, both of whom were close friends of James and visited him here. Indeed, he'd have been more at home in Alice's Wonderland than in the circles of high society, where he quickly ran afoul of convention. He refused to submit to the rigors of an ordinary adulthood, opting instead to create a fantasy world of his own.

James adored animals — he was said to have liked them better than people — and animals played a major role in his gardens, not only in the symbolism of the parrot tails and seagull wings in his sculptures, but in the menagerie — the parakeet castle, the house of the ocelots and the crocodile garden, for example.

Born in 1907 into English nobility, James was rumored to be the illegitimate child of King Edward VII, who was his godfather. He grew up in a 300-room mansion under the care of his nurse; his socialite mother was aloof and cold. James was fond of relating a story he'd heard about his mother in which she was said



A colorful lotus tops a fountain in Plaza Santa Lucia in Las Pozas.



Snow White's Mirror stands at the entrance to the workshop, where workers poured concrete into wooden forms to create the elaborate structures.

to have called up to his nurse, "Bring me one of the children to take to church." Asked which one, she responded, "The one that goes best with my blue dress."

His mother rejected his interest in poetry and the arts, considering it "unmanly," and pushed him instead to pursue a career in business and politics.

The young James would have none of it, and took up with a bohemian crowd in college, hanging out at pubs and poetry readings and drinking Champagne for breakfast. At 21, he received a large inheritance and began to involve himself more in artistic circles, eventually painting his stepfather's hunting cabin lavender and turning it into a showcase for the surrealist arts.

He spent much of his fortune patronizing a whole generation of then-little-known artists, in-



Arches and gateways that lead nowhere are among the many mysterious structures left by James in Las Pozas.

cluding Dali and Rene Magritte and composer Igor Stravinsky. He amassed one of the largest collections of surrealist art in the world, which he later sold to finance the ongoing construction at Las Pozas.

But it was in Mexico that he found his true home and the sense of family that he had longed for since childhood. He met and befriended the operator of a telegraph office in Cuernavaca, and they discovered Las Pozas together. Gastélum, who later became director of construction for Las Pozas, fell in love with a girl from Xilitla, married and had a family, and James was naturally a part of this family — "Tío Edward," as he came to be known.

He began his botanical garden by importing thousands of exotic plants from all over the world. He was crushed, however, when he returned from his travels one winter to find that an unheard-of snowfall had killed his prized orchid collection. Snow was so unusual in those parts, in fact, that his friends explained to him that

company to take you there.

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Las Pozas documentary: An award-winning documentary by Avery and Lenore Danziger, 'Edward James: Builder of Dreams,' www.junglegossip.com.



A waterfall cascades into one of the natural pools that give the garden its name: Las Pozas, or the pools.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Xilitla is about 40 miles south of Ciudad Valles in the state of San Luis Potosí. You can fly into Tampico and rent a car, or if you are staying at Posada El Castillo (see accompanying story), you may make arrangements to be picked up by hotel staff. A cheaper but more adventurous (and time-consuming) alternative: Take a Turimex bus from San Antonio to Ciudad Valles (ordinarily 14 hours, but may be more if the buses are delayed at the border); then catch a bus to Xilitla, or make arrangements with a tour



After passing through the Queen's Ring, the visitor is regarded by a line of stony serpents along the trail.



The surrealist-influenced Posada El Castillo, the Castle Inn, was the home of Edward James, creator of Las Pozas.



The upstairs veranda at El Castillo is a wonderful place to catch a breeze and watch the mist rise over the mountains.

El Castillo offers guests a touch of surrealist whimsy

Butterfly sculptures, Gothic windows add to fantasylike experience.

By TRACY L. BARNETT
EXPRESS-NEWS TRAVEL EDITOR

XILITLA, Mexico — If you've come to see the surrealist wonderland of Las Pozas, you'll want to spend at least a night in the curious guesthouse that was its creator's home. Posada El Castillo doesn't so much resemble a castle — as the name implies — as it does the mansion of an eccentric and whimsical millionaire, which it was.

The first thing that greets you as the gate clangs behind you is a path of raised white footprints — representing those of Tilly Losch, as I later discover, the lost love and obsession of Edward James, referred to as Sir Edward James. Room after room unfolds with curious details — such as the wrought-iron spiral staircase that leads to the Mariposa Room, with 16-foot ceilings, towering Gothic windows and two ceiling fans with green butterfly sculptures twirling overhead.

A stacked collection of glass hexagons serves as a window at the end of a long hallway, where tropical plants bloom and a door opens out to a vista of the Sierra Madre mountains and a bougainvillea-ringed swimming pool. A hammock hangs in the covered balcony overhead, inviting visitors to relax and catch a breeze. Meanwhile, two classical Mexican señoras right out of a Diego Rivera painting cut papaya and arrange *pan dulce* (sweet bread) to serve with coffee for a continental breakfast, jungle-style, in the spacious, elegant salon-style great room.

On the other side of the complex, a veranda imprinted with the hand of Plutarco Gastélum, James' best friend and right-hand man, who designed this home and helped James to build



A wrought iron spiral staircase is one of the delights in El Castillo.

Las Pozas. Plutarco Jr., known by all as Kaco, is now the inheritor and caretaker of this posada, as well as Las Pozas.

I pause to look out at the mountains from this balcony and notice a giant, whimsical red lily-shaped structure on the roof of the main building, and I smile. James left his imprint towering over Xilitla, it seems — not just in spirit, but in concrete, as well.

El Castillo is just a block from Xilitla's town square, surrounded with boutiques and cafés but also with the traditional Mexican market in the town square. There you can pick out a fresh avocado and ask the farmer to cut it up for you, eat *pan dulce* still warm from the oven with fresh baby bananas, and sample a *tuna*, prickly pear cactus fruit, all for just a few pesos.

With only eight rooms ranging from \$60 to \$130 a night, the atmosphere is intimate and familiar: You'll have to make reservations well in advance, as the place is popular with in-the-know tourists from around the world. You can call Gabriela with questions or to make your reservation at (011) 52 489 365 0038, or write to info@jungle gossip.com.

tbarnett@express-news.net



The surrealist-influenced Posada El Castillo, now a unique bed and breakfast inn, was the home of Edward James, creator of Las Pozas.

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