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Hang Time

Get ready to kick back and relax in high, south-of-the-border style with the Mexican villa Chicago designer Patrizio Fradiani brought back from the brink.

By Meghan McEwen
Photography by Bob Coscarelli

After two hours on the runway, four hours in the air and 45 minutes on the bumpy road from Puerto Vallarta to the smaller, less touristy Sayulita, I can't wait trade to my jeans for a sundress, mix a margarita and find the best view of the Pacific Ocean from the hilltop villa where we're staying for a week. Our driver Ramone, however, is lost in the cheerfully messy labyrinth of brightly colored, open-walled villas built into the mountain overlooking the town.

I give him the phone number of the property manager, Nick, who steps in as the remote navigator. Ramone is trying to relay our whereabouts, and with my remedial grasp of Spanish, I'm only able to make out "Gringo Hill."

Make no mistake: This is not a gated community. It's not even an exclusive one. Welcome to thatched-roof paradise, where expats from the U.S., Canada and Australia have flocked for the natural beauty, laid-back surf vibe and authentic culture that still sets this small fishing village apart from resort towns. "People move here because they value time over money," explains Nick, who traded in a successful advertising career in Portland, Oregon, for a surfboard and quiet life with his family in Sayulita. "They're creative people who reach the brass ring in the United States, and then they're like, 'This is it? That's not enough.' We want more. More time, not stuff."

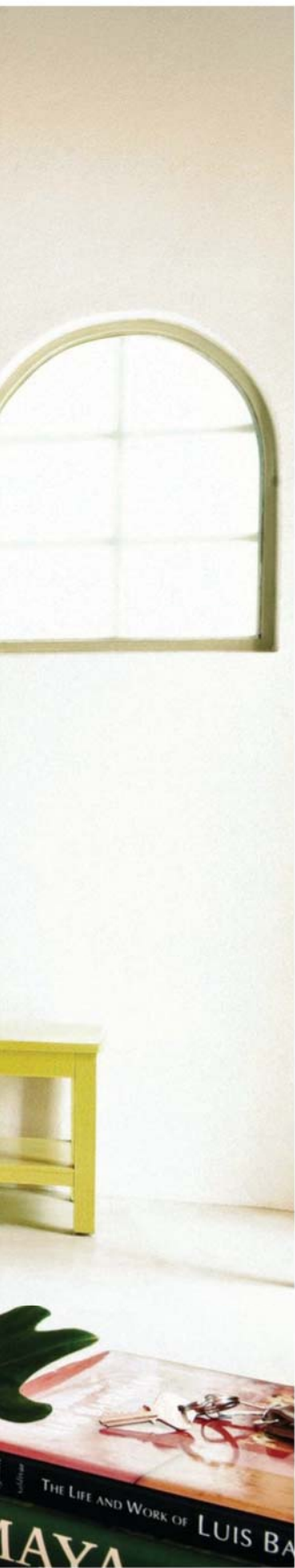
When we finally arrive at Casa dos Chicos, the bright orange villa, it's quickly apparent why owner Patrizio Fradiani and his partner Mark fell in love with this site a year ago. High in the open-air living room, three floors above ground (and more than 100 feet above sea level), it's a soaring view of the Pacific Ocean and

THE HIGH LIFE
Upstairs, the common outdoor space has everything you need to survive a relaxing vacation: a full kitchen, twin hammocks, a plunge pool and 360-degree views. The swimming pool blue floor contrasts with the orange exterior, which plays off the cords suspending a striking cluster of lights Fradiani created.









Right: A Mexican antique dresser topped with stuffed handmade giraffes. Left: Inside, the color palette gets toned down, pulling from the shades of the landscape and letting the views of the Sayulita mountainscape take center stage.



verdant mountainous coastline. The tops of houses and palm trees and climbing fuchsia bougainvillea give the distinct feeling of sitting in some sort of luxe tree house.

Fradiani, a Chicago-based designer who tackled a stone farmhouse renovation in his native Italy a few years ago, was in Sayulita on holiday last New Year's when he discovered this property—which was then two separate, run-down houses standing side by side. "It felt private but not isolated—just away from the hustle and bustle. We went up to the palapas just to breathe—it was so delicious," he said.

Since purchasing the property in early 2010, Fradiani has spent one week every month in Mexico, working around the clock to rehab—and often rebuild—the two structures, which he connected by a walking bridge upstairs on the third-level—a majestic open-air rooftop living room and kitchen. Not that he's dedicated much

time to building walls, which are few and far between in this 2,700-square-foot spread. In fact, the only real walls are around the four sumptuous bedrooms—two in each building. This place is all about outdoor living. And why shouldn't it be?

"The garden is this lush, amazing thing. When I told Mark that over half of it would be gone because of the pool, he was shocked. The area of the pool was like a jungle, but everything we took out, we replanted somewhere else on the property."

For Fradiani, these work stints come in frantic, midnight-oil-burning spurts: laboring alongside contractors and crews; drawing up plans; uprooting and replanting; decorating; upholstering chairs and having bed covers and drapes made with raw fabric he bought at local markets and vendors. His design vision: "Lots of colors but always in context with lots of luminous white."



“There was no self-doubting at all. It’s all about the Mexican colors and the luminosity. I had to let go of my modernist aesthetic because I couldn’t sustain it with this house. It’s a pretty funky house. I was fighting it but ended up embracing the funky,” he says.

In the end, he created an indoor-outdoor paradise—with as many welcome quirks (a bridge that connects the two structures via rooftop living areas) as luxuries (the infinity soaking tub with a wide ocean view). I feel peacefully at home by the end of day one. A couple of afternoons later, while lounging in one of the two hammocks slung between pillars supporting the thatched roof, I notice a neighbor sitting on her cantilevered porch below, painting with watercolors. At almost any time, day or night, the sounds of the surroundings drift through with the breeze—a drum band, a cacophony of roosters, a truck peddling gas with music and announcements through a speaker, kids playing soccer nearby.

On day five, after what seems like an endless pleasure cycle of lazing about—beach, nap, pool,

eat, hammock, repeat—I’m feeling compelled to *do* something. And with such lush, beautiful jungle in every direction, we settle on a hike (caveat: to a private beach for more laying around). The big question: north or south? If we venture south, the ultimate payoff is a remote black-sand beach—a rare enough spectacle to stir some excitement—but our trusty, on-call concierge, Nick, assures us there’s a rough stretch of jungle with various points of impasse. Since I’ll be carrying a 1-year-old on my back, we opt for the northern route, which promises a string of deserted beaches.

Once we come to the edge of town, as the pharmacies and off-the-main-drag beach hotels start to taper, the road simply, abruptly ends. It’s as if the jungle is permitted to envelope and thrive beyond this defined, invisible line. We duck under a chain onto a bumpy dirt path marked by ATV tracks into a dense canopy of palms, ferns and red bark trees. There are a few opportunities to veer off the trail and head up a mountain or down toward the beach, but we persevere.

Above: Before the pool was created, there was what Fradiani refers to as a lush jungle of plants and flowers in its place. They replanted everything they removed somewhere on the property. Opposite page: At night, the interior rooms glow, and three matching lights hang over the dining table surrounded by wooden chairs painted bright pink.





“I had to let go of my modernist aesthetic, because I couldn’t sustain it,” says Fradiani. “I was fighting it but ended up embracing the funky.”

I have a suspecting notion that the longer we hike, the more beautiful the payoff. Eventually the path deposits us onto a wide, sandy shore with palm trees growing right in the sand. The crashing surf is loud and aggressive, and I imagine surfers lugging boards to such hidden alcoves, *Point Break*-style. We are the only people on the beach, locked in by rocks on each side.

There aren’t many places on the world travel map, where you can experience such remote, wild nature in the context of such a spirited, authentic town. The next day, I spend the morning at Café Sayulita, one of the two cafes off the square, where kids play and Chiapas women sell their handmade blankets, bags and stuffed animals. At a nearby table, three men debate the latest town controversy: the fate of the organic market, as it relates to competition for local business owners. Across the street, a man sells ice cream from the front of his pedal bike with an umbrella overhead. He walks it

instead of riding. Dust flies up anytime a car drives down one of the cobblestone streets. And a small group of people, presumably first-day travelers, stands on the sidewalk, looking around at the colorful, peeling-paint facades of the thatched-roof buildings, trying to determine where to go. I resist the urge to tell them what street food vendor has the best fish tacos—the stuff of legend—or where to find the most delicate warm churros sold from the back of a beat-up pickup truck. Those are the secrets you need to uncover on your own.

My plate of heavenly huevos rancheros has long been cleaned, and as I finish the last drip of cappuccino, I know how I’m going to spend my last day in Sayulita: beach, nap, pool, eat, hammock, repeat. I’ve unlocked the biggest secret: The thing to do in Sayulita is nothing at all. Especially if you have a view like the one at Casa dos Chicos. (Rent it at casadoschicos.com.) ■

Above: When you’re outside, the house takes on a color-saturated appeal, reflecting its bright surroundings. But inside, the palette references the more subdued clays and greens of the views out the window. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Bedroom corner; flora; town square plaque; public beach; brand-new art gallery; street food around every corner; outdoor shower at Casa dos Chicos; tacos.