



On the Yucatán Peninsula, a first attempt at an eco hideaway

A Texas-based developer is creating a jungle hideaway, hoping to attract buyers more interested in exotic birds and wild orchids than ocean views.

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NEAR TULUM, Mexico: In the dense tropical forest west of the Mayan ruins of Tulum, a Texas-based developer is creating a jungle hideaway, hoping to attract buyers more interested in exotic birds and wild orchids than ocean views.

The project, Los Árboles Tulum, is the first large-scale attempt to build an environmentally sensitive, master-planned residential project in the inland region of the Riviera Maya, which is best known for its beach resorts and the discos of Cancún.

"We saw a need for this in the market," said Jason Schnurr, the business development director for the Tierra Group, the family-owned company that is developing Los Árboles Tulum. "It's not going to be all millionaires in the Riviera Maya."

Riviera Maya's coast, on the eastern side of the Yucatán Peninsula, is one of the fastest-growing residential markets in Mexico, primarily offering hotel-condo projects. But beachfront land is growing scarce, and expensive.

A single hectare, or almost 2.5 acres, of developable land along the coast can easily cost \$500,000. In contrast, each of the 261 two-hectare lots in Los Árboles Tulum is selling for about \$55,000.

But to help preserve the jungle environment, buyers must agree to build on only 5 percent of their lots and they must provide their own electricity, most likely through solar panels or generators. Water will be pumped from wells, and sewage will be treated by a natural wetlands filtration system commonly used in the area.

While rustic jungle retreats are common in countries like Costa Rica, such developments are rare in Mexico, where most buyers are looking for either sandy beaches or colonial charm.

"I would have my concerns," said Bruce Greenberg, a real estate consultant and appraiser who specializes in Mexico. "Marketing a jungle project will be challenging, unless they can provide a special lifestyle to attract that particular kind of buyer."

Los Árboles Tulum intends to woo buyers with a chance to live in one of the world's most unusual ecosystems. There is no surface water on the Yucatán Peninsula, but large rivers flow beneath the rocky surface, creating massive caves known as cenotes, which have strong spiritual significance for Mayans.

The development site is 12 kilometers, about 7.5 miles, inland on the road that connects the coastal ruins of Tulum with Coba, a largely unexcavated Mayan site that some believe once rivaled the splendor of the better-known Chichén Itzá. And it is only a few minutes' drive to the Sian Ka'an biosphere, a 650,000-hectare nature reserve stretching down the Caribbean coast. (It can be visited at www.losarbolestulum.com.)

Schnurr said 40 lots had been sold, even though the project was still in its early stages. Sixty percent of the buyers are from the United States, he said, and 40 percent are from Europe.

Stephen Vernstrom, 60, of Maple Grove, Minnesota, and his wife, Mona, were among the early buyers. They want to build a second home and eventually to retire here.

"We were searching for a larger parcel where people weren't stacked on top of each other," said Vernstrom, who runs a rock climbing school in Minnesota and often leads eco tours in Mexico. "When you're on the coast, it's a whole different lifestyle."

Obtaining title to land on the coast is a notoriously difficult enterprise in many parts of Mexico. Large tracts are often controlled by an ejido, a collective of local citizens. "I see a lot of green on the map, but none of it is for sale," Schnurr said.

For Los Árboles, the Schnurrs were able to obtain three properties totaling 481 hectares, including a ranch once used to harvest gum from the zapote trees that still cover the land. But for now, Los Árboles Tulum is little more than a half-built narrow road cut through the jungle. Construction has been stalled while the project awaits its final permits from the local government and they are hoping for some action soon.

The state of Quintana Roo was widely criticized for the rapid development of the Miami Beach-style strip of hotels in Cancún, so all the building projects in the area are undergoing increased environmental review. And under pressure from environmentalists, the state has set new restrictions on high-rises and high-density developments on the coast.

"They're using Cancún as a basis for development, and they're not going to let the same thing happen here," said Randy Bowser, a local botanist active in environmental issues.

With several rare species of plants and wildlife in the jungle, Los Árboles Tulum has attracted extra scrutiny from government inspectors, as well as local Mayan hunters who feared the project would drive out the wild turkeys and boar.

"What we've found is the Mexican government really wants to do right" by the project, said Matthew Schnurr, Jason's brother, as he showed a visitor around the property.

The Schnurrs know first-hand that developing in Mexico can be tricky. Their first project in the area — a development called Paraiso Tan-kah Bay, with 105 residential lots on the coast north of Tulum — was almost completely sold out when the local government decided to do an environmental and zoning review of the area, delaying the project for several months.

The family expects Los Árboles Tulum to benefit from growing interest in the Tulum area. While high-end resorts are the norm to the north, the village of Tulum still has a kind of bohemian charm, with backpacker camps and nude beaches.

"There has been a frenzy in Tulum recently of people buying and selling," said Shawn Bandick, a real estate agent at One Stop Realty on the Riviera Maya. He believes there is a market for the type of rustic experience that will be offered by Los Árboles Tulum.

"They will attract a clientele who have had enough of urban living," Bandick said.