

# The Seattle Times

## ***Solar panels, snakes to share space in Mexico jungle***

***When everyone else was looking to the beach, the Schnurr family set its sights on the jungle.***

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TULUM, Mexico — When everyone else was looking to the beach, the Schnurr family set its sights on the jungle.

About five years ago, the Austin, Texas-based developers hit upon a vision of eco-friendly development: a subdivision of solar-powered resort and retirement homes in the lush jungle two hours south of Cancún.

The Schnurrs had a hunch that the magical jungle, filled with rare orchids, mysterious underground rivers, toucans and howler monkeys, would entice buyers willing to live off the power grid in a beautiful, but sometimes unforgiving, environment.

"We had no idea what we were getting into, but we set sail," said Jason Schnurr, director of business development for the project, dubbed Los Arboles Tulum. "We really went out on a limb on this one."

It turns out people were fascinated by the idea. More than 40 lots have been presold, with buyers including lawyers, teachers and movie directors from the U.S. and as far away as England and Africa.

Individual 5-acre lots cost \$55,000 and buyers then build their own homes following environmental safeguards.

The 1,200-acre project has sparked a host of copycat developers. The once-ignored land near Los Arboles is now the scene of several other jungle-living projects.

"They are light-years ahead of the competition," said R.J. Thoman, a Texas native and longtime real-estate agent in Tulum. "We're all here because of the beach, but most people can't afford the beach."

Since the onset of the financial crisis, Thoman said, the jungle lots have been outselling the much pricier beach lots, which can reach \$500,000 for a third of an acre.

Schnurr Ventures, made up of father and founder Greg Schnurr and sons Jason and Matt, was drawn to the Yucatán to develop a beachside housing development in Tulum, a free-spirited, eco-conscious town.

After the success of the original project, the group came upon an available parcel of land about eight miles away in the jungle. With help from family friend Cameron Crow, the developers came up with the concept for Los Arboles.

"Tulum has a kind of eco-boutique feel and we said, 'Let's extend that out to a residential community out in the jungle,' " explained Crow, now the company's sales director. "The first day you're out there and a toucan flies by or you see monkeys running through the trees, you realize you have an opportunity, but also a responsibility."

But the developers had no idea of the challenges they would face negotiating Mexico's frustrating bureaucracy. Only in the past month have the Schnurrs cleared the last legal hurdles of environmental studies, municipal permits and, most important, individual titles for the subdivided lots, something they say had never been attempted in the Mexican jungle.

Spooked by stories of American buyers caught in legal nightmares, the Schnurrs made proper permitting and titling a priority. Crow said the four years spent wrangling with Mexican bureaucrats was worth it because it will give buyers legal security.

With an inexpensive local workforce, Crow said, buyers can build a top-quality home for as little as \$200,000, including the price of the lot and extras such as solar panels, a water well and a natural septic system.

Crow said he expects most people to build high into the jungle canopy, where solar panels can catch sunlight and cooler winds decrease the need for air conditioning.

"It's about your aesthetic, your budget," Crow said. Some potential buyers are wary about Mexico's plans to build a second international airport, possibly nearby. But others see the possibility of a new airport as a plus, offering quicker travel to and from their jungle homes.

Mari Pintkowski, who runs an eco-friendly bed-and-breakfast nearby, said that living in the jungle takes some getting used to, mostly getting comfortable with the local wildlife, including snakes and scorpions.

"The idea of the jungle is frightening for a lot of people," she said. "But you have to step back and look at it with amazement and wonder. ... Living in the jungle is exciting. It's an adventure."

For the local communities, made up mostly of Mayan villagers, the coming of high-end developments to their once-quiet jungle has been a blessing and a curse.

Francisco Loria, who runs a taco stand in the nearby village of Macario Gomez, said that while some residents worry that the arrival of gringos in the jungle means an end to their way of life, others say the developers bring badly needed jobs and increase the value of their land.

"I think it will be good because before there was so much poverty," Loria said. "Even if people had land, all they did was sell wood or hunt. You can't plant crops here in the jungle."

The Schnurrs say they want to respect local Mayans by making the project as unobtrusive as possible.

"You see some of the big resorts on the road from Cancún, and they project the image that 'we are here to dominate the land,' " Crow said. "We didn't want to convey that feeling. We wanted it look as if it had been there for a long time."

### ***Environmental guidelines at Los Arboles Tulum***

- *Buyers are only allowed to build on 5 percent of their five-acre lots, and 90 percent must remain in its natural state.*
- *Because electricity won't be provided, residents must generate their own, most likely through wind or solar panels.*
- *Residents will get their potable water from wells drilled into underground aquifers.*
- *Residents will use natural filtering systems for their wastewater, which will flow into wetlands where indigenous plants process harmful bacteria.*
- *Buyers will be encouraged to use natural construction materials such as wood and clay roofing tiles.*