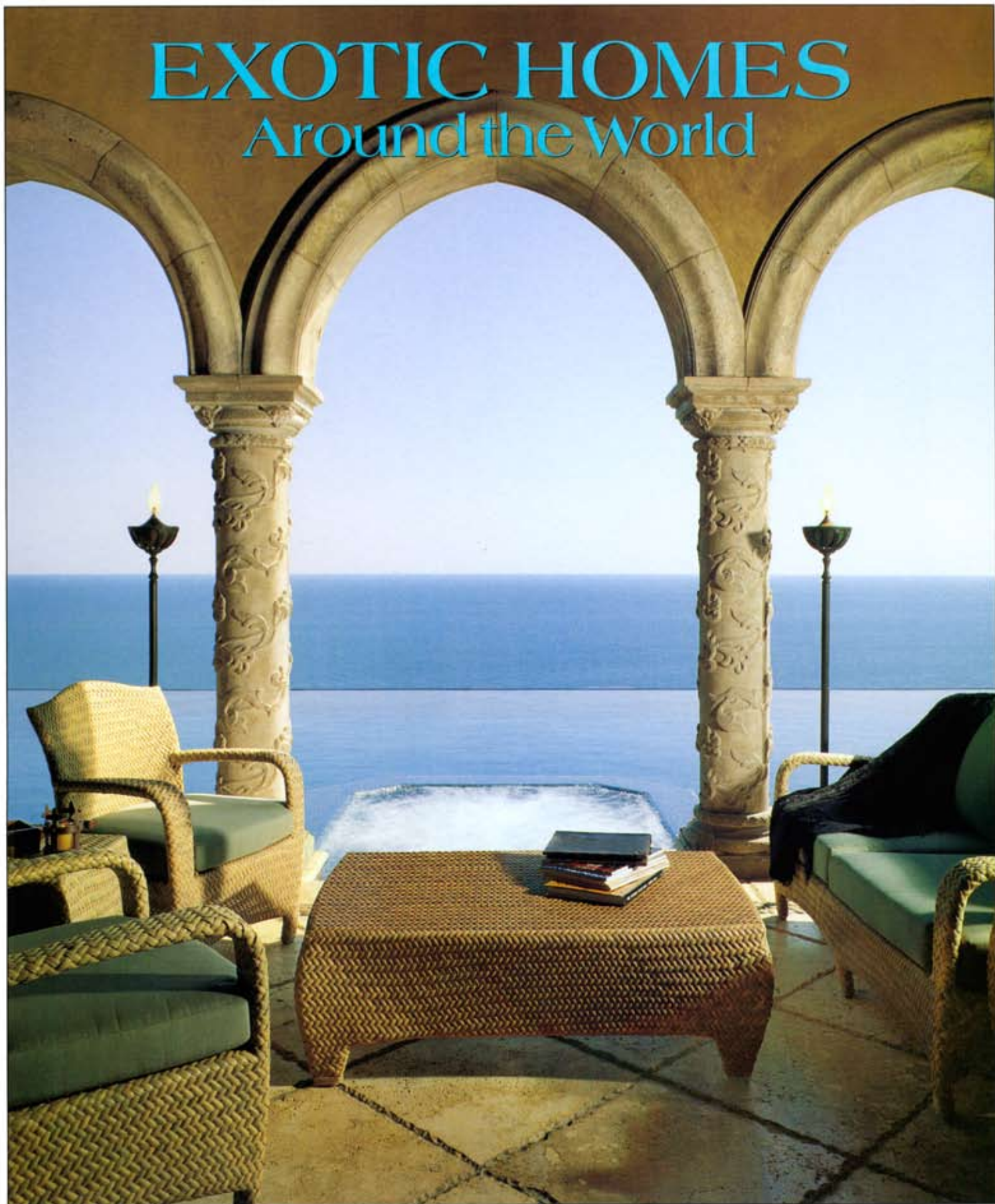


# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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## EXOTIC HOMES Around the World





# Against All Odds

CONSTRUCTING A FAMILY COMPOUND IN THE WILDS OF COSTA RICA

Architecture by Camilo Parra, AIA/Text by Wendy Moonan/Photography by Erhard Pfeiffer

**T**he rain forest of Costa Rica might not be the first place you'd expect to find a retired executive of a high-tech Houston company, but that's exactly where Manuel Parra commissioned El Refugio, his family vacation compound.

The enterprising former software developer bought a swath of remote jungle, sight unseen, on Costa Rica's southeast coast and asked his architect son, Camilo, to design a house "with all the comforts of home"—which, for Parra and his wife, Nancy, includes a wine cellar, a trash compactor, a satellite television and a fully equipped gym.

Building a luxury house in the tropics isn't easy, especial-

ly when it's in an earthquake zone. Erecting one in Punta Uva, a sleepy, sparsely populated fishing village 40 miles south of the nearest city, Puerto Limón, is even harder. The closest airport is in the capital, San José, a four-hour drive, and the closest lumberyard is 62 miles away; every appliance had to be imported from the United States. Nonetheless, Camilo Parra designed the 65-acre compound, supervised the construction and got the 8,000-square-foot house built in less than a year.

The setting was magnificent, if formidable. The hillside site—a short hike from a sandy Caribbean beach—was densely forested with tall oak, mountain almond, cedar, ceiba, Atlantic laurel and mimosa

trees. It had no roads, electricity or running water. In fact, half of the property falls within the Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge and cannot be touched.

"There are plants that date back to the dinosaurs," the architect says. Macaws, toucans, woodpeckers and rare broad-winged hawks are just a few of the 100 bird species that swoop through trees populated with jaguars, sloths and howler monkeys. The birds make quite a racket, especially at sunset. Foxes, wild pigs, otters, lizards, coatis, rabbits and snakes can be heard foraging in the thick underbrush.

But Parra had a strategy. He had spent a summer working for an architect in Limón before opening his own firm in

Houston in 1998, so his approach reflected his experience in the region. "The first real trial was making a road," he says. "You can't design a house without a topographic map of the area, and you can't make a good map without a good road." Once he had hiked through the property, he hired a road contractor nicknamed Pájaro Loco ("Crazy Bird," after Woody Woodpecker), who simply got

**ABOVE:** A dense Costa Rican jungle on the Caribbean Sea proved to be the perfect setting—jaguars and all—for Manuel and Nancy Parra's ecologically friendly retreat, El Refugio. Architect Camilo Parra, the couple's son, designed the house, which is made up of three joined pavilions. **OPPOSITE:** Each unit has a separate staircase for privacy.





LEFT: The master bedroom, its own unit, has sliding doors on both sides leading to verandas. "It projects a feeling of being surrounded by the jungle and the ocean," Parra says, "which is visible through the trees." Honduras mahogany and rattan furniture "fits the tropical motif."

BELOW: A walkway connecting the main living area to the master pavilion. "The covered verandas are another way of cooling the house," Parra says, "while serving as an extension of the interior space." They also allow inhabitants to remain outside during the frequent downpours.



on a bulldozer and carved his way up the hill, artfully dodging the trees, until he'd gone a third of a mile.

There Parra found a perfect site for the house. ("You can see only glimpses of the ocean, but you can hear the surf," he says.) Then he spent days walking around with a topographer to create a com-

and laid out in an irregular C around a kidney-shaped pool. Each structure has a separate entrance so his parents can stay there alone comfortably or welcome friends and family, including young grandchildren, for long visits.

"The site is so remote," Parra says, "that I knew it was going to have to be a low-tech

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puter model that he could work on from Houston. He brought in electrical lines from the main road and hired a local dowser to find fresh water. Next, he recruited biologists to conduct a survey of the wildlife and vegetation for the planning authorities and had a structural engineer do a seismic analysis. Finally, he was ready to build.

The architectural scheme was simple: three independent two-story pavilions joined by covered, elevated passageways

house. Instead of steel, I built it almost entirely of wood found in the area." Adopting local methods of building, he went to San José and hired a contractor, an engineer, a cook and 45 carpenters. They set up a camp and a woodworking shop on the premises, living in metal sheds and washing with water from the new well.

Parra is essentially a modernist. Here he deconstructed the classic West Indian plantation house, borrowing regional design elements like the tin

gable roof, oversize columns and generous verandas, but making them contemporary by employing a strict rectilinear grid throughout. Large overhanging eaves provide crucial shade and shelter from the constant downpours, and some of the wide, covered passageways are furnished so the family can remain outdoors in inclement weather.

All the living quarters are on the second floor to take advantage of the panoramic views of the forest, catch the sea breezes, prevent dampness and discourage wild animals from wandering in. The master suite occupies one pavilion, the guest quarters occupy another, and an open-plan family area with a large study and living/dining room is in the center. This main pavilion, with its tall ceilings and almost seamless transitions from interior to exterior, gives the heart of the house a feeling of airy spaciousness. For the furnishings, the Parras chose mostly wood and Honduras rattan because they fare well in the damp, salty climate.

The first floor houses the utility spaces: a dressing room, shower, two-car garage, outdoor bar by the pool, gym and workshop, where gardening tools are kept. "The rain forest is such a harsh habitat and grows so fast, it could easily overcome the house," says Camilo Parra. The task of keeping the jungle at bay belongs to the caretaker, who patrols the perimeter daily with a machete, hacking away at the encroaching greenery. The rewards, however, are well worth the effort. As Manuel Parra puts it, "Like family, this house is for life." □

The pool area has an outdoor bar and "is the focal point of the El Refugio experience," says Parra. "Everything relates to it." The pool's curves offset the house's geometry and "evoke something more natural," he adds. "It's like a pond—at least the frogs think so; they're always jumping in."













Taking advantage of the climate, Camilo Parra created an open plan to naturally ventilate the house. In fact, he says, the main pavilion, a hub for the guest and master pavil-

ions, needs no air-conditioning due to its louvered screens and large sliding doors. Parra used native timbers such as mountain almond and Atlantic laurel for the entire project.