



Mexico's hedonistic haven

SI SI PENALOZA

MEXICO— From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Oct. 01, 2010 11:29AM EDT

Last updated Friday, Oct. 01, 2010 4:55PM EDT

Two hours south of Puerto Vallarta, Costa Careyes is a leggy, little kiss of paradise – a fresh, nubile supermodel hidden in the Mexican travel monologue of overworked milkmaids. Built on a colossal parcel of coastal jungle by owner Gian Franco Brignone, the resort sits next to 1,500 hectares of virtually uninhabited lagoons, mangroves, marble cliffs and sand beaches on the Pacific coast.

More than 40 years ago, the enigmatic founder of [Costa Careyes](#) hand-picked this paradise; under his guidance it flourished into a hedonistic haven of patriarchs and playboys, artists and agitators, lovers and libertines. Welcome to *la dolce vita* – but with a ripe, frisky *anejo* standing in for the lusty, vintage *sangiovese*. On my first day in the town piazza we feast on the best brick-oven pizza this side of Naples; every three to five minutes, my consummate host, now 84, drops a fresh sliver of ice into my tequila.

The first-born scion of a Turin banking family, Brignone voyaged to this pristine stretch of Jalisco coast on July 2, 1968. He flew over Costa Alegre's dramatic geological ramparts and lush wilderness in a single-engine Cessna 172, laying eyes on what would be his life's work. Brignone recalls the first time he saw the Careyes shoreline in Carlos Tello Diaz's coffee-table monolith *The Magic of Careyes*: “It was love at first sight. An unconditional love, one that continues to this day. No woman or child of mine had ever inspired so much love in me.”

Mere weeks after his inaugural trip, Brignone purchased this feral frontier for \$2-million (U.S.), packed up his family in Paris and moved, essentially, into the Mexican bush. Stirred by the jet-set scene of Costa Smeralda in northern Sardinia, the Brignones collaborated with architects, artisans and aristocratic investors to establish a distinct Careyes chic. Cliffside castles dot the landscape in a riot of culinary colours. Think: a produce truck bound for El Bulli tipping over an emerald escarpment, exploding into a tropical hamlet of mango peach, saffron scarlet and papaya pink. The unifying motif of the signature Careyes style is the palapa – a palm-thatched roof over an open-sided structure emphasizing breezy open living. A sun-kissed microclimate offers an enviable 24 C and 345 days of sunshine, allowing breeze portals to replace traditional windows – a rare opportunity for completely glassless architecture.

The majority of the neighbouring Chamela-Cuixmala Biosphere remains protected land, ensuring that Careyes continues to flourish in an ecologically sensitive manner. To this day, about 600 crocodiles live on the property and you can't drive eight kilometres without a wild boar sighting. Man-eating beasts and Frette towels, Careyes is a study in contrasts.

Over the past four decades, Brignone has limited growth to one affordable 50-room beachside hotel, 40 casitas, about 50 private villas and a handful of intimate dining venues serving specialties fresh from local waters. Despite 42 nationalities represented in the year-round community, the overall aesthetic of this exclusive enclave remains Brignone-approved. An antidote to the overkill of St. Tropez, there are no magnums of Moët at the marina, no tongues wagging with yacht envy and zero glitzy nightclubs. Conspicuous consumption is considered mortifyingly *déclassé*: European royalty and

Hollywood starlets hit the beach wearing whatever they woke up in, basking in the sunshine of leaving the paparazzi far, far behind.

The surrounding Costa Alegre also offers sport fishing, scuba diving and snorkelling at Barra de Navidad and Bahia de Tenacatita; ecotourism adventures at the stunning Hotelito Desconocido; world-class 18-hole challenges at the El Tamarindo Golf Resort. At 20 degrees latitude north, the region shares a climate similar to Hawaii, an ideal winter getaway for Canadians overdosed on Cancun and the Caribbean.

Embracing the local fiesta-siesta lifestyle, I rouse from slumber to the savoury aroma of grilled quesadillas at Casa Constelaciones. Irma, the in-house attendant who services this three-bedroom villa, has handmade all my favourite sides – tostadas, guacamole, piquant salsa, fresh fruit salad. My “den mother” proves to be an exemplary personal chef, housekeeper, margarita-maker and social secretary. She tells me I’m invited to lunch at Casa Sol de Oriente, the six-bedroom villa that is arguably the crown jewel of Careyes. On arrival, I glimpse a scene worthy of Bunuel’s cinematic social surrealism: Everyone is stripped down to tiny swimwear; six reclining bathers surround a standing Brignone, framed by a view that’s more pictorial epiphany than mere scenery.

Here, the senses fully awaken, for beyond the shaded great room is a cascade of stone steps opening up to a vast panorama of blue – the infinity pool “spills” into the sapphire Pacific then up to a cloudless sky. The three sprawling bedroom suites in the main villa merge sitting areas with walkout pool access. I ride down by funicular railway to see the James Bond-worthy tower bedroom suite and a cozy two-bedroom bungalow.

After a divine lunch of *chilies en nogada* – poblano peppers stuffed with slow-roast pulled pork, pine nuts, goat cheese and apples – the official pastime is lounging, and passing out immediately is perfectly acceptable. Our party migrates in a natural rhythm to oversized daybeds under a soaring 11-metre palm ceiling. This is the spiritual home of fresh air palapa living – stark white interiors livened up with vivid textiles, eccentric artwork and meditative water elements.

The next morning, Giorgio Brignone, the founder’s rakish polo-playing son who oversees Careyes operations, invites me to the GF Brignone Foundation’s Sea Turtle Protection Program, which has released more than 200,000 hawksbill and loggerhead turtles since the late 1970s. Clutching a bucket of newborns, I make my way from the beachside nursery to the shoreline. Giorgio instructs me to shake the turtles out into a lineup, basically littering them onto the sand like I’m salting my Hogtown driveway. It’s a tad unceremonious, but I do as I’m told. They are disoriented at first, but Darwinism eventually kicks in and suddenly it’s a turtle race to the sea. Within seconds, the heir strips down and dives into the waves with more than 80 hatchlings. All that remains on shore is his puddled designer white denim and an empty nursery bucket.

We then visit Giorgio’s pride and joy, the Costa Careyes Polo Club. This impressive horticultural miracle of Bermuda-grass polo fields in the heart of the Jalisco jungle draws elite athletes and their beautiful followers to tournaments sponsored by Cartier and Moët & Chandon. Here, cocktail hour is a romance linguist’s dream – caftan-clad doyennes slip between French, Spanish and Italian, often in the same sentence. Legendary house parties attract guests like Giorgio Armani, Francis Ford Coppola, Cindy Crawford and Bill Gates. *Kill Bill*’s motley crew threw a rager on the beach after Quentin Tarantino shot the film’s final scenes on property. The ultimate insider invite? Heidi Klum and Seal wed in their Careyes villa and return each year to celebrate with a growing list of friends. Still, under the senior Brignone’s reign, guests know whatever happens here will remain off the radar.

“Careyes is not for everyone,” Giorgio Brignone confides. “Yes, this is geared to the luxury market, but with an edge. We developed this international haven to embrace, not conquer, the jungle. Living the Careyes lifestyle requires an improvisational spirit – and an adventurous heart.”

Special to The Globe and Mail