Edward James' Folly – La Pozas 2012

Look what we found in the jungle of East Central Mexico. It's a series of surreal structures, a cement garden. Located just outside the village of Xilitla (pronounced *heleetlah*) **Las Pozas** is the semi-fulfilled dream of Edward James, a multi-millionaire Englishman with some royal blood coursing through his veins. Built between 1964 and his death in 1984, the project cost an estimated $5 - 7 million.

What's a folly? According to the dictionary, it's "a costly ornamental building with no practical purpose, especially a tower or mock-Gothic ruin built in a garden or park". As you will see from the photos, James built several of these. You'll see columns built to support nothing, stairways to nowhere, doors that open and close to air. James said he wanted to "build a house that has wings and sings in the night". You have to understand that Edward James was a patron and friend of several Surrealist artists, including Dali, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Magritte and Delvaux.

Why did James decide to build in Xilitla? Talk about off the beaten track, this little village is surrounded by high mountains. I thought I was going to break my wrists negotiating countless hairpin turns through the Sierra Gordo mountains.

The story begins just after WWII. James was exploring Mexico on his own when he stopped in a telegraph office in Cuernavaca, near Mexico City to send a telegram. He got into a conversation with the telegraph operator named Plutarco Gastelum, a Yaqui Indian from northern Mexico who spoke very good English. Their conversation went on to the point that James realized that Plutarco was the right hand man he was searching for. James explained that he was looking to settle someplace in Mexico, but wasn't sure where. He could use a man like Plutarco as driver and interpreter. Legend has it that James' next remark cemented their long relationship: "Plutarco, I can guarantee that you'll make more money in a year working for me than you'd make in a lifetime as a telegraph operator". So they bought a WWII surplus Willys Jeep, and began to tour Mexico.

One evening they were dining in a restaurant when Edward noticed a beautiful orchid floating in a bowl of water in the center of their table. Edward loved orchids, and had grown them in his greenhouse on his estate in England. He didn't recognize this species. So he called the owner over to find out where it came from. "Xilitla", was the response. He heard that many species of orchids grew wild in the jungles that surrounded Xilitla. He visited the place and found it to be true. After walking the jungle for some time he found his magical place. At that time foreigners were not allowed to own property. So with Edward's money Plutarco purchased what was a former coffee plantation that backed onto a high waterfall. For about twenty years James used the 80 acre space to raise orchids

and exotic animals. In 1962 an unprecedented cold snap killed off all the orchids. In 1964 Edward James began to build his “Surrealist Xanadu”.

Plutarco supervised up to 120 artisans and laborers to bring James’ ideas to fruition. According to our wonderful guide, Mundo, James was not easy to work for. Plutarco and his team would be in the middle of one project when Edward would order him to stop work immediately and begin building another project that he had “dreamed”. He said he wanted to include lots of cement flowers, “the kind that cannot be killed off by the weather”.

James and Plutarco built a large house in downtown Xilitla where James would stay during his visits together with Plutarco and his family. When he died, he bequeathed Las Pozas and the house to Plutarco. Plutarco’s children turned the house into a 12-room hotel, **La Posada El Castillo**, where we stayed during our visit.

If you go, we would recommend you hire Mundo to guide you. Sure, you can walk the complex yourself. We saw many people do it. However, we would have missed 50% of the high points without him. The paths meander through the jungle, and they’re easy to miss. Mundo has wandered this amazing complex since he was a kid. He’s Plutarco’s nephew, and considered Edward James as his “grandfather”. He knows all the history, all the stories. He can be reached at www.mundoextreme.com.mx

So now it’s time to view our photo album. Hope you enjoy the photos as much as we enjoyed taking them. If you have trouble opening the links, copy and paste them into your browser.
https://picasaweb.google.com/104483921374151958062/LasPozasByEdwardJamesAtXilitlaMexico

Also, if you want to learn more about Las Pozas and Edward James, go to:
http://www.xilitla.org/index.php or http://www.architecturalescapes.com or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_James

Hasta luego,

Chuck & Anzie