

Park Life

A groundbreaking sustainable development on **Mexico's** west coast is launching with a skatepark, not – refreshingly – a golf course

Words by GRACE LEE

“It’s a vision of living for the future,” says Element Skateboards founder Johnny Schillereff when I ask him to describe the town of Xala.

A one-of-a-kind destination in Costalegre, Mexico, the world-first, self-sustaining development is being built from the ground up, with the community at its core. Wrapped around 1,200 hectares of Mexico’s west coast, between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, the first phase of the project is slated to open in 2023. It will include a working hacienda, learning centre and collection of socially conscious hotels, as well as a pioneering project set to improve the local area’s water supply.

“Xala was created with the community first in mind, right from the start,” Schillereff tells me as we discuss its inception. “The land had been left unused for 40 years due to a legal dispute between the government and local community. Ricardo [a founding partner

of Xala] acquired it through careful negotiations with individual local farmers, breaking the deadlock between state and community, while making sure everyone left with a fair deal.”

Now in its 13th year of construction, the town is still being built with that same ethos of care for the area and its people. It’s why Xala is being launched with a skatepark, not just another golf course. Founding partner Ricardo Santa Cruz tells me that the skatepark was created as an inclusive environment. “Supporting the community and helping local people flourish is key to our project,” he says, “so it feels natural to make the skatepark the first concept we launch.”

Brought to life in partnership with The Heart Supply, a skateboarding social initiative founded by Schillereff, “Xala with Heart” is about creating an inspiring, safe space where locals and visitors alike





can thrive. The Heart Supply works with leading skateboarders around the world to give out free skateboards to as many kids as possible, with a mission to inspire equality, friendships and cultural diversity.

“Riding a skateboard is a creative, physical activity that sees no colour and builds self-esteem,” Schillereff points out. “Putting a skateboard under kids’ feet allows them to roll towards positive opportunities and a happier, healthier life.” It’s a sentiment that he knows all too well himself, having turned to the sport during a turbulent time while he was homeless in his youth. “Skateboarding saved my life,” he tells me. “Building a skatepark here is the ultimate way for me to pay it forward.”

Inaugurated in spring 2021, the Xala with Heart opening ceremony brought together Olympic skateboarding hopefuls Jagger Eaton, Heimana Reynolds, Rio Batan and Camp Schill for the planting of a “Giving Tree”, symbolising Xala’s commitment to social and

environmental stewardship, as well as a message of thanks from skateboarders, who ultimately owe the existence of their boards to trees. “It was a very happy day,” says Schillereff. “The team shared their skateboarding skills and stories and handed out boards to young skaters from Puerto Vallarta.”

Skateparks are known for building connections the world over, yet at a time of such instability and uncertainty, they feel more like a lifeline. Xala with Heart is a celebration of self-expression, a siren call to the ecotourism industry, and a reminder of the unifying power of a shared passion.

THE LOWDOWN

Xala with Heart will open to the public in early 2022, with the first full phase of the Xala project planned to open in 2023. Follow [@xalawithheart](https://www.instagram.com/xalawithheart)