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ESCAPE TO REGENERATIVE LUXURY TRAVEL

Xala, a new development in Mexico's Costalegre, takes regeneration to another level



PHOTOS COURTESY OF XALA

Xala, a sustainable luxury development on the coast of Jalisco, Mexico, is surrounded by two internationally protected estuaries. It sits along five miles of coastline, also protected as part of a turtle sanctuary.

by Kelly Bryant

You may see the acronym ESG (environmental, social and governance) thrown around a lot in real estate circles, placing a significant focus on the ecological impact of new developments. There's a delicate balance of good intentions and financial viability surrounding these projects. But for Ricardo Santa Cruz, CEO and one of the founding partners of the Xala Project, the desire to plan and execute sustainable communities goes much further than checking off a few compliance boxes.

The Xala Project truly embodies this commitment. Located along the western coast of Jalisco, a state in Mexico, the highly anticipated community is set to be a stunner. Aside from a hotel component to meet the needs of visitors, Xala will feature four different types of real estate opportunities. These include 75 rancho lots, with six acres of land and 197 linear feet of beachfront, plus 14 cove lots across three acres and 131 linear feet of beachfront, all of which are currently on sale. Additionally, there will be a not-yet-announced branded residence program with Xala's hotel operator. And its recently launched casita residences have already sold out.

However the destination is what Santa Cruz refers to as an "environmentally sensitive area." It's surrounded by two estuaries with international protections and has five miles of protected coastline with a turtle sanctuary. Some might have backed away from developing such fiercely guarded land, but for Santa Cruz, it's become a passion project — though not one without its challenges.

"While master planning the development, we wanted to not only ensure these ecosystems would not be affected, but also take it a step further and improve the environmental quality of the natural resources," he explains. "These resources were deteriorating and under strain due to many years of poor agricultural and farming practices."

For Santa Cruz and his development partners, this meant taking a holistic approach. They needed to assemble many different experts across a variety of fields: land planning, estuary restoration, turtle management and regenerative farming, to name a few. All while creating a low-density project still financially sound for investors. Thanks to a successful track record in both development and hotel management, including the One&Only Mandarin in Riviera Nayarit, Santa Cruz and his team have been able to do just that.

MAINTAINING BIODIVERSITY

Stefanie Brendl, the founder and executive director of Shark Allies, a U.S.-based nonprofit dedicated to protecting sharks and rays, is a partner in the development of Xala. Her two decades of experience with sustainability projects have been integral to the community's biodiversity and reef conservation goals.

Brendl has helped develop a "ridge-to-reef" plan that focuses on the protection and restoration of nature, not just on the property but in the surrounding areas as well. With the first projects now underway, she notes the importance of involving both regional experts and the local community to get a feel for best practices. For the next phase, the community will continue its involvement. "This will require a combination of solutions to bring back water flows and water quality," Brendl says. "For the reefs, we are discussing the establishment of small fish refuges or marine-protected areas that will help with the recovery of biodiversity and eventually improve artisanal fishing."

But her work with Xala doesn't stop at the planning stages. Brendl hopes all of this attention to detail will provide future visitors with a unique opportunity to appreciate marine conservation.

"The estuaries and turtle sanctuary will play an important part in showing people how the land and ocean are interconnected," she says. "We cannot have healthy systems without protecting biodiversity. They will see it and experience it. Through guides, visitors will understand the best that nature has to offer at Xala. Guided bird watching, plus scuba and snorkeling excursions with experts, will be available to give guests a first-hand experience."

Getting up close and personal with nature is expected to be a big draw for travelers, however Santa Cruz makes it clear this is not your typical vacation destination.

"Our unique difference when marketing Xala is that it is not a resort, it is a community leading the way in regenerative development and what's possible for the future," he says. "Our travelers want luxury, but in an organic way."

KEEPING WITH COMMUNITY

Xala really doubled down on social impact with the Xala With Heart Foundation. Its mission is to improve the quality of life in two neighboring communities — José María Morelos and Higuera Blanca — through three pillars: personal growth and sports, education and culture, and economic resilience.

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The turtle sanctuary at Xala has existed for more than 25 years. The development team recently enhanced its facilities, providing new housing for both the staff and the turtles.



Xala is a low-density project, designed to restore and protect the land while creating a unique community welcoming new homebuyers and travelers. Each step of the development process is thoughtful and intentional.



Exploration awaits at Xala, where guests will be invited to immerse themselves in the nature, culture and heart of a truly unique community. This might mean kayaking through an estuary or hiking along 25 miles of trails.



There are 440 acres of organic mangos here, featuring two different varieties of the fruit: Ataulfo and Kent.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF XALA

Xala is committed to regenerative practices that honor the land and community, so experiences here are particularly unique. You won't find a golf course, but rather a preserved and protected landscape.

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The first program, Descúbrete (Discover Yourself), enrolled 130 teenagers, including young men and women from the community, and offers classes to encourage personal growth. Focuses include ambitions, overcoming obstacles and setting aside limiting beliefs. Next month, the foundation will launch its first economic resilience program in partnership with a Mexico-based business university. The intention is to support local entrepreneurs who want to reach luxury industry standards with additional education.

Cecilia Paredes, director of the Xala With Heart Foundation, is excited about what's to come for the foundation, and the difference they can make in the area.

"Our first step is to actively listen to the dreams, needs, pains and talents of the community," Paredes says. "Based on that, we propose programs that include co-participation, creating a sense of joint-responsibility that fosters and strengthens the programs we implement. This is a key part of the social empowerment support we provide, helping communities gradually become creators of their own destinies."

The dichotomy between providing a luxury travel experience and local support is apparent. But between community outreach and a united concern for preserving the area's beauty, the two aren't as far apart as you might think.

"José María Morelos and Higuera Blanca are characterized by their vibrant Jalisco traditions, making them highly appealing destinations," Paredes says. "These communities offer a wide range of distinctive local events, encompassing both religious and cultural celebrations. Furthermore, the recent influx of Xala's long-term and socially conscious luxury industry vision has sparked renewed energy in the community."

This is one of the many reasons it's important to Xala's partners that the project is positioned as a community rather than a resort. He wants visitors to feel immersed in the culture, which might mean touring an organic mango plantation by the locals who run it. Or maybe it's seeing how salt miners mine the organic salt produced in one of the estuaries. But it isn't all work and no play.

"Perhaps they want to play soccer with some of the locals on our soccer field or join them on the skatepark or pump track," Santa Cruz says. "They can kayak in the estuary and learn where the fish hang out from the local fishermen, or simply canoe or paddle board surrounded by migratory birds."

Essentially, everything being put in place is intentional, with the hope to establish fluidity between locals, visitors and new Xala homeowners.

RESTORATION FROM THE GROUND UP

There would be no Xala without the very land it sits on, and agricultural manager Edgar Mendoza and organic farm coordinator Antonio Monjaras have their work cut out for them, recovering and restoring vegetation in areas that have deteriorated over time. With the community's Reforestation Restoration program, the goal is to preserve the connectivity of ecosystems, including jungles, forests, wetlands and dunes.

"This program allows us to reclaim degraded patches of low-lying deciduous forest, while also providing soil protection, climate regulation and water harvesting," Mendoza says.

In theory, these efforts should help regenerate 590 acres, which represents 21% of Xala's total land.

One conservation strategy is keeping the natural habitats in their original place, without moving anything in place of development.

"We prioritize the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems in the region," Monjaras says. "Additionally,

we have adopted land preparation practices that promote soil moisture, ensuring optimal conditions for the endemic mango trees in our plantations and preventing them from drying out."

Everything is done to benefit the soil's flora and fauna, which means they refrain from mechanical tillage in the Xala orchard. Synthetic chemicals are avoided to reduce both water and soil contamination, while also preserving the insect population.

Perhaps most impressive are the 440 acres of organic mango fields, which produce both Ataulfo and Kent varieties. Sure, some of that acreage could have been used for additional bells and whistles to attract visitors, but that's not what this community is about.

"Unlike most of the large Mexican Pacific resorts that build huge golf courses, Xala remained firm to its philosophy, seeking to maintain the practices of the area," Mendoza says, "giving back to the community and the land through regenerative practices and opportunities to connect with nature. So Xala decided to cultivate mango fields, a sustainable practice that uses less water than a golf course and generates jobs in neighboring communities while restoring the land."

As the fully realized vision for Xala gets closer to fruition, Santa Cruz hopes it will become a platform for other international developments. He welcomes the opportunity to share what they have learned about implementing regenerative development while still being profitable.

"We want to share with others what we got right, how to avoid the mistakes we made along the way and help each other to constantly improve," he says. "Xala is a new way of conscious development and we welcome anyone who wants to either come learn from us or share their knowledge and experience with us."



**A RESTORATIVE TRAVEL DESTINATION IN MEXICO'S PACIFIC COAST
BALANCED WITH NATURE AND COMMUNITY**

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