

CASA DE LOS VENADOS

Calle 40, No. 204

Valladolid, Yucatan, Mexico

Revised September 2009

"A house is a hobby..."

We have wanted a traditional hacienda-style house rich in historic heritage in Mexico for a long time. Interest started when John was a freshman at Lewis and Clark College and had the opportunity to spend his freshman year in a "home stay" with a family in Puebla, Mexico, learning the language well enough to speak, be understood, and enjoy very much living in Mexico..

When we were married almost twenty-seven years ago, our interest slowly continued to grow and further intensified. Together, we spent many vacations at our time share Club Internacional de la Cancun, where John and his father owned eight weeks. Then, we invested in a three bedroom beach front resort hotel condo, then a three bedroom townhouse known as "Casa de la Sirena" – all in Cancun.

Though enjoyable, clearly Cancun does not offer an opportunity to find a traditional hacienda-type house, since it was developed only 30+ years ago from a fishing village to a major resort area. We looked on and off during vacations for seven years in Puebla, Oaxaca, then in and around Merida. Puebla, while appealing, is too far from Cancun to facilitate back and forth trips, transportation and time-wise. Oaxaca was the same situation, but so appealing to us culturally, that we looked but could not find any property that was in our price range, and within an easy walk to the Zocolo. Plus, everything we saw in Oaxaca is historically protected, not just facades, but the entire interior of the houses as well. Most of the houses were made of adobe with walls in extremely bad repair or in mounds of rubble, waiting to be rebuilt.

Thus, our search moved to Merida, the seat of the Yucatan, only to find out that most properties in Merida near the Zocolo had been "remodeled" for commercial use and were not very appealing and frankly just too urban. So, we continued looking at small towns and

villages outside of Merida all the way to Valladolid and the surrounding area. In the process, we decided we are more "city mice," than "country mice," and agreed living 20 kilometers from our nearest neighbor in the countryside was not for us. After our hacienda-hunting experience, we learned what we would like to have and what we did not care to have.

In July 2000, we asked a prominent Cancun lawyer neighbor of ours with family ties in the Yucatan to recommend a local Valladolid contact to help us find a property. He put us in touch with his wife's aunt Emma, who lives in Valladolid with Ray, her American born husband of 35+ years, two sons, and a daughter. In September 2000, when Dorianne went back to Chicago to manage a meeting, John eagerly drove to Valladolid to meet Emma and Ray Berst at the old hotel El Mesón del Marqués across from the Zocolo. Over coffee, he discussed with them our desire to find a hacienda-style house with a courtyard. During their conversation, he found out Valladolid was a tranquil city of approximately 70,000+ inhabitants, which was overlooked by many house hunters for years because the mind set was, historically, the wealth was in Merida, the seat of the Yucatan. The new wealth and development was in Cancun for the last 30+ years. This mind set left Valladolid midpoint between them, with little or no economic reason to "modernize" or tear down old buildings to build modern ones; it was a time capsule of wonderful old buildings just waiting for someone to come along and "nurse" them back to their full glory and historical identity.

From our viewpoint, Valladolid also appealed because only the Centro facades are historically protected, not entire buildings, as was the case in Oaxaca. For our purpose restoration would be much easier and less costly. Ray and Emma leisurely drove John around town in the Centro area, while the Bersts pointed out several old hacienda-style houses that had been remodeled by either Mexicans, or one or two Americans. So far the tour was disappointing.

Driving back to the Zocolo, John saw a large old rundown, high walled house on Calle 40, a quarter of a block from the Zocolo. High up on the facade a sign looked like someone had simply taken a

paint brush and roughly painted on the wall, "Se Vende Esta Casa," with a phone number. At first John thought it was so close to the Zocolo and so large that we probably could not afford it. Emma prevailed and called the phone number using her cell phone and arranged with an attorney who answered to have the caretaker at the property open the house and let John see it about an hour later. No one had lived there since 1964, when a cousin of the owner was the last person to live there. Vallasolitanos, whom we later met, seemed to be very specific about the year because the cousin had just purchased a new car in 1964. The second day he owned it, he parked it in the house inside the main door. A portion of the roof fell on it, totally crushing the vehicle. He moved out shortly thereafter so the story goes and only a caretaker had watched the property ever since.

During the walk through, John saw a large 55 foot square central courtyard with a magnificent sour orange tree, an indigenous jicara tree, and overgrown shrubs, or scrub brush jungle. Looking at the virtual jungle of mixed plants in the back of the house, he saw the potential the house offered. It was bigger and better than anything we had looked at in Oaxaca, Puebla, or Merida. John asked Emma to inquire about the price. The asking price seemed surprisingly within reason. That evening, he called Dorianne in Chicago, who was preparing for a business meeting, and described what he saw that afternoon. Dorianne agreed since the excitement in his voice was overpowering and convincing that we should make an offer. John told Emma that evening and asked her to make an offer for the property.

Subsequent, laborious negotiations and bargaining required a month of back and forth dialog. We finally came to terms with the 80+ year old, spinster from Merida, who inherited it. This hacienda-style house was one of a number of properties that the female line in her family had inherited many years ago. The male line in the family historically got the income-producing haciendas in the countryside. At one point, one of the interesting antidotes about the negotiations is, he asked for the name of her US bank where she wanted our bank to send the wire transfer of US dollars. Her lawyer said she did not

have any bank account and did not want US dollars. She firmly wanted the full purchase price in CASH, in Mexican pesos! (To this day, he still has a mental picture of her putting stacks of bills in a steel box under her bed, or somewhere else where she keeps her money and valuables.)

Through her lawyer, we told her she would have to come to our bank in Cancun to get the money. We were not going to hire an armored car to carry that amount of cash to the next meeting to close the deal. Finally, we compromised. Her lawyer agreed to take a certified check in pesos made out to his Mexican bank and he would get the pesos for her. Three days before we were to close, she decided she would not sell to a foreigner. The day was saved by our fast thinking attorney in Cancun. Luckily he already had a "shell" Mexican corporation set up for another client who decided not to use it. Finally, through her attorney, she agreed to sell to the Mexican corporation, but not to John as an individual foreigner. All of these hurdles to jump over now seem to add flavor and humor to the story. Though, at the time, each delay seemed like a monumental crisis to resolve for which we thought that each might be a "deal killer." Within 36 hours, we become the owners of a Mexican corporation!

Once the closing was completed on October 10, 2000, John immediately set up an appointment with William Ramirez, our initial architect, before he flew home that evening from Merida, via Mexico DF to Chicago. Coincidentally, we had admired his work at Xcanatun, an old historic hacienda, which he restored from a cattle ranch and sisal hacienda, into a luxury boutique hotel and restaurant, 12 kilometers north of Merida, on the road to Progreso.

(Thinking back, right after we made our first offer on the hacienda, John called our friend Mane Montes de Oca and asked her to find out the name and location of the architect who restored Xcanatun. John remembered having lunch there in the renovated buildings earlier that year with Mane, formerly director of public relations, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Merida.) Our fear was that the architect would be someone from Mexico City or other distant location out of our reach. Lucky for us, it turned out to be William

Ramirez, who owns his own architectural firm in Merida. He had received a number of architectural awards for his work restoring old haciendas as either small hotels or single family residences.

During the first meeting in November 2000, we showed Ramirez a number of books on Mexican architecture with Post-It note marked pages to give him an idea of the type of house we hoped he would create for us. These were suggestions to incorporate many of the features we liked for our preferred life style. Ramirez immediately sensed what we wanted. Our design vision was finalized with the statement that we wanted to honor the simple traditional colonial style of the 400+ year old structure, yet have the inside look like it was done by Luis Barriagan!! (The famous Mexican architect whose signature look is contemporary and very understated).

Ramirez did not disappoint us. His initial sketches and subsequent floor plans now reveal the vision of five duplex guest suites with an additional self-contained two-story duplex suite for us. There is a large landscaped garden in back of the house complete with a pool, fitness center, bar and pergolas, as well as a landscaped courtyard in the center of the house. At the time, the house was built by the town's alcalde, the Royal appointed mayor. (Remember Mexico was a Spanish colony then.) He had most of the ceilings made 8 meters high (as most other "important houses in town only had 6 meter high ceilings), befitting a man of his importance. Almost all the rooms are 5 meters wide, which is the maximum they would cut the vigas (wood beams) that held up the stone ceiling. The walls are approximately one meter thick, constructed of rubble stone. Each of the five guest suites (ranging in size from approx. 1200+ to almost 1500+ square feet) have a two story living room area and a bedroom loft. All of the bathrooms have indoor showers. Three of them have an additional outdoor shower in their own private garden. The central patio has a portales roof covering approximately 15 feet of the perimeter all around the 55 foot square courtyard, with a large contemporary stone fountain in the center we had shipped from Guadalajara. A roof top terrace has been constructed in front of the house with its own bar, bathroom, and covered seating area for viewing the San Servasio Cathedral across the street when the lights

turn on each night, illuminating the steeples, watch the blazing sunsets to the West, and hear the bells calling parishioners to services.

Needless to say, the project is a passionate, combined labor of love for both of us. One interesting feature is the sala grande in front of the house that is approximately 78 feet long, 16 feet wide and 25 feet high. Dorianne asked Ramirez to design and install a musician's balcony at one end of the room. Later, we added a ceramic mural by Daniel Rosel of skeleton mariachi's performing at a village fair on the back wall behind it. Potentially, in the future, the room will be a show place open to the public for live musical performances, as well as art exhibits of our extensive collection of Mexican contemporary and folk art.

We also have had brief discussions with the Chairman of the Board and the Executive Director of the new Museo de Arte Popular (MAP) in Mexico, DF, about using our sala grande for exhibitions. We have chosen to become financial contributors to the new Museo de Arte Popular as members of their support group "Friends of MAP," since we are strong believers in their mission and their ability demonstrated so far by the construction and layout of the new Museo's exhibit space, and the assembly of a quality permanent collection to accomplish their goals. Plus, we have chosen to loan MAP a number of pieces from our collection for exhibition at MAP, and other traveling exhibitions.

As a matter of fact, our house and entire collection of art are a restricted bequest for the public benefit. Our goal is to "give something back." We want the house to be a living structure, honoring its history, but moving forward as a quasi public facility for the performing and visual arts. The restricted bequest of the property, its contents, the collection, and an endowment will provide broad flexibility to use the structure in the future after we are gone.

Another goal is to share Casa de los Venados with our many current and new friends we will meet throughout the rest of our lives. Included will be the people of Valladolid whom we hope to involve in

helping us plan cultural events that will enlighten, entertain, and educate the community in the facilities of the house. We started this process with a fiesta honoring John's mother's birthday, on December 21, 2000. At the time, the current mayor and his family, a number of other prominent city residents such as the assistant mayor, and the town historian, etc. were our guests at the festive event.

In February 2004, we invited approximately 70 people to a fiesta in honor of John's parent's 62nd wedding anniversary and to share the progress that has been made in the remodeling process. The guest list included the priest of the Cathedral, the general who commanded the local military brigade, who is now the chief of police, the new mayor and her family, the former mayor, who is now the Federal Congressman from that District (who is the cousin of the previous mayor, and coincidentally, the brother-in-law of David Rivero, our current local architect and general contractor), another former mayor and his family, who is now our lawyer), and many other new friends.

In the mean time, we have a new life-long hobby, since Casa de los Venados is a project that will never ever be truly finished, in our life time. Our original expectation was for a three to five year remodeling project. However, in early 2009, the house is more or less finally finished--simply because the project was so large, mostly hand labor, and we bought an additional piece of property next to the original house in back and constructed a 3-story annex housing 5 servant rooms, a laundry room, a large storage room, and a maintenance/repair shop. Photos and a slide show on our web site tell the story: www.casadelosvenados.com .

Our Valladolid general contractor, David Rivero, has been fantastic. Not only is he the general contractor, in addition, he has a workshop where his skilled crew does iron work and wood working. His workers have been wonderfully creative in the construction of iron railings and custom furniture and other wood pieces for the suites. Often they worked only from photos we gave them from international architecture magazines or art publications. The results have been beyond expectation in most cases.

The swimming pool, inlaid with Italian bright white and brilliant dark blue glass tiles, the servants quarters, the small gym, the back yard bar and additional sunken conversation seating area, the jacuzzi, the marble and glass bridge across the swimming pool, are now complete.

Our two-story suite within the main building is named, The Venado Suite. Specifically, the ground floor has a completed living room, dining room, guest bathroom, and spacious kitchen. On the second floor, the master bedroom, bath, shower stall, large walk-in closet, sitting room, and dressing room are complete, as are the library and studio/office down the hall. The large "commercial" kitchen for larger parties, next to the sala grande, is almost complete with all the new kitchen equipment being installed.

All five guest bedroom suites are comfortably furnished with upholstered furniture, sectional sofas, club chairs, king beds, two air-conditioning mini-split units, mini refrigerators, and many other amenities. All the suites are ready to be occupied by friends who may choose one by name: Maya, Izamal, Valladolid, Diego, or, Frida. Artist Daniel Rosel has completed large ceramic tile murals in each of the suite gardens. For instance, in the Valladolid Suite, Vallasolitanos are shown marching around the Zocolo in a festive parade. In the Izamal Suite garden, he installed a ceramic mural of the Virgin of Izamal at the convent, where the Pope said mass a number of years ago. And, certainly, just as important—the laundry room is now complete with washer and dryer for all the guest linen and pool towels, etc.

Fine tuning of the basic components of the house are coming together quickly at this point--after nine years in the making. We have now entered a new, but just as exciting phase. Included in this phase was the fun part in April 2009, opening over 100 crates of folk art objects bought during the last seven years from artists throughout Mexico: Mexico City, Guerrero, Matamoros, Metepec, Michoacan, Oaxaca, Patzquaro, Puebla, Tonalá, and Valle de Bravo, to name a few. Everything from all wool hand-woven area rugs from a village near Oaxaca, to contemporary paintings, watercolors, and

original prints that need to be framed, lots of ceramics, barro (clay), and carved wooden folk art items have been placed in each of the five guest rooms, and elsewhere around the complex to "finish it off," and give it that WOW factor we are looking for when guests come for the first visit! Extra artifacts are in one of three storage areas waiting to be placed for change off. We have also had fun recently giving tours of the house and art collection to interested collectors; most recently to a group from the San Antonio Texas Art Museum.

Our friend, Mario Peniche, Valladolid's current mayor/presidente, asked us to allow him to hold a press conference in our entry foyer in front of an 11'x17' framed high relief, ceramic mural depicting life about 100 years ago, in colorful Mayan village. We commissioned the work from Luis and Jorge Valencia of Oaxaca, who came to the house to install it, several years ago. It has been a visual highlight ever since as it is one of the very first pieces you see upon entering the main door. Peniche was interviewed by Televista, one of the national Mexican TV networks. The interview focused on his desire to expand tourism in Valladolid and what he and leading merchants in Valladolid plan to tell the State Governor about their hopes and expectations for assistance from the Yucatan state government to expand tourism in Valladolid.

We hired a botanist/landscaper to plan our landscaping for the complex. The results have been pleasing: numerous orchid plants were positioned in various gardens around the house. He has completed stunning landscaping in each suite garden. A number of metal sculptures are also used throughout the various garden areas. Dramatic night decorative lighting has also been added. Odds and ends: We bought 25 large black and white "golf" umbrellas, each with the Casa de Los Venados logo imprinted, to be used by our guests when it rains. In the works are "house logo" return address labels, house cards, and stationary, as well as two photo post cards to be used by our guests.

Eventually we will edit all the 1000+ photos currently on the web-site and pick about 10 "before," 10 "during," and 10 "after" photos to

view, and store the others on a disk, as part of the history of the construction.

The most recent additions have been stereo music systems installed in the sala grande, the central courtyard, the entry, on the roof top terrace, and at the swimming pool. Twenty plus phones were also installed throughout the house. We now have a giant electric roll-down screen and projector in the central courtyard to watch TV and movie DVDs in the evening.

In the Fall of 2009, *Yucatan Living's* publisher contacted us to ask permission to shoot a video of the house as part of their new "Homes of the Yucatan" video feature for their publication. We hope to share a video web link with you in the not to distant future of our home.

"A house is a hobby". . . and, again, we expect this will be a life long one. When you see the house, you will also understand the saying, "collecting is a passion and an incurable disease, but one from which you never die." These two sayings seem to ring true for us. View the website for more photos of how Casa de los Venados is coming along, and to see some additional folk art and contemporary art we collected for the suites and rest of the house.

Saludos,

John and Dorianne Venator

www.casadelosvenados.com