



FIRST RESORT

THE PERIPATETIC MANUEL TORRES
AND HIS FAMILY BUILD THEIR
DREAM HOUSE IN THE BLOSSOMING
TOWN OF DOMINICAL.

BY DEBORAH KIRK PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK DUFFY



A palapa shelters the breezy, open-air living room, which offers sweeping views of the Pacific. OPPOSITE: The house was sited to capture 180-degree vistas of the rain forest in back and the ocean in front.



JOHN LEE

It was one of those nights,” says Manuel Torres, remembering the serendipitous moment that he decided to build a beach house in Dominical, Costa Rica. “There was a full moon over the ocean, stars everywhere, incredible views—the perfect Dominical night. Everything clicked. My wife looked over at me and said, ‘OK, we have to buy something here!’”

Torres, who was born in Nicaragua, was no stranger to Costa Rica’s allure; he’d first come to the country’s beaches with his grandmother when he was just two years old. But his family moved to northern California when he was still a boy, and it would be many years before he’d return to this sublime corner of the tropics. In the intervening years, he studied computer engineering, received a business degree from UC Berkeley, and embarked on a remarkable 14-year career with Intel that had him based in such far-flung locales as Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo and Beijing—and traveling constantly.

“I consider myself a professional traveler,” says the 44-year-old Torres. “I’ve been to something like 50 countries, and along the way I picked up a lot of ideas about hospitality. I wanted to apply those ideas to creating experiences that others would like. So

ABOVE LEFT: The entryway’s trio of red lacquered tables reflects an Asian influence. ABOVE: Kyo, Misako, Manuel and Kyra Torres at the beach in San Francisco.

when I came back to Costa Rica in 2003, it was because I wanted to try a second career developing resorts.”

Before it occurred to him to build a beach house of his own, Torres chose Dominical as the ideal site to launch his new, post-Intel career. On a pristine expanse of beach—and in partnership with developers from Punta Dominical, a master-planned community on a sprawling 2,000-acre property—Torres created a luxury resort called Kiana. His goal, he says, was to establish a world-class condominium hotel that, like much of Costa Rica itself, would appeal to a special type of traveler: one that not only has a sense of adventure and respect for nature, but also wants ease of access and inevitably “a little luxury at the end of the day.”

Kiana’s 26 villas, designed by Costa Rica’s Zurcher Architects, reflect some of the exotic influences that Torres encountered during his years crisscrossing the globe. The resort fuses elements of tropical style, such as open-air palapa decks, with a Southeast Asian-inspired aesthetic, which is evident in the simple, clean lines and polished hardwood furnishings.

A striking cantilevered concrete staircase casts dramatic shadows on the wall, concealing a Japanese-inspired rock garden below.



"We often have visitors with young kids, so it can be chaos in here—which is fine," says Torres. "But you don't have to have a dumpy couch to have a comfortable family room."





In 2005, with the first phase of Kiana well under way, Torres and his Japanese wife, Misako, planned to return to California to raise their children, five-year-old Kyo and three-year-old Kyra. But they'd fallen in love with the serenity of Dominical, with its lush rain forest and laid-back beach, a longtime favorite among nomadic surfers. That quintessential moonlit night, says Torres with a laugh, was all he needed to convince him that this was the spot for their dream house.

The site they chose is a secluded promontory overlooking the Pacific. "The views from here are outrageous," says Torres. "There's no other word to describe them. We have a 180-degree view of the ocean and a 180-degree view of the forest and mountains. We had a few guiding principles in designing our house. Rule number one was: Don't mess with the views."

Torres worked with Costa Rican architect Erick Vidal to develop the house's look, which Torres describes as "modern Mexican, combining tropical vernacular with modern lines and contemporary angles." He gave the architect a "catalog of images that called out elements that I wanted in every part of the house," including works by modern Mexican architects, Thai and Balinese interiors and design ideas drawn from the luxe Aman Resorts in Southeast Asia.

ABOVE: The kitchen serves as the house's "command central." Beyond the glass, a curving infinity pool wraps around the back of the house.

"Because the house is surrounded by ocean and rain forest, it was very important that it harmonize with the environment," says Torres. "I describe its layout as an inverted Spanish courtyard—instead of having everything focus inward, I wanted all the living areas, corridors and walkways to face outward."

The three-story, 4,500-square-foot house—which Torres named Casa Mar y Luna—accomplishes just that. A long exterior walkway, connecting the master bedroom and children's rooms with the open-air living room, offers sweeping views and the exhilarating sensation of walking on treetops. The open kitchen, which Torres calls "command central," looks out onto the formal dining room, living room and family room, which seem to almost float over the ocean. An inviting infinity pool, its curves echoing the contours of the shoreline below, is visible from all the common areas.

While the house is defined by its clean and modern geometry, Torres added warmth and balance with distinctive rustic elements—a palapa over the living room and a rough-hewn pergola atop a second-story deck. Many of the materials used throughout—from plantation-grown teak on the decks to the stones that form a



textural, triple-height shower wall in the children's bathroom—are from local sources.

Torres wanted to infuse the house with an Asian flavor, which he achieved to a large extent with furniture. Following Torres' guidelines, Lauren Gamboa, a San José, Costa Rica-based interior designer, took a cue from the minimalist interiors of the Aman resorts and created clean-lined furnishings using local materials. Among her custom pieces are the square dining table, dining chairs and the daybed in the living room, which, Torres says, "every guest immediately gravitates toward."

Subtle Asian-inspired touches are found in unexpected places too. The front door is decorated with a deconstructed yin-yang symbol, and a Japanese rock garden is tucked under a striking cantilevered concrete staircase at the entrance. Even less obvious is an arrangement of little windows on the house's tower—when viewed from afar as a kind of abstract constellation, they suggest the shape of a dragon. "This house is like a book in which, little by little, you discover the elements that make it special," says Vidal.

Once Casa Mar y Luna was completed in mid-2006, Torres and his family moved to San Francisco, settling happily into another

ABOVE LEFT: Lauren Gamboa designed the bed using melina, a local hardwood. ABOVE: In the children's bath, water cascades down a skylit stone wall.

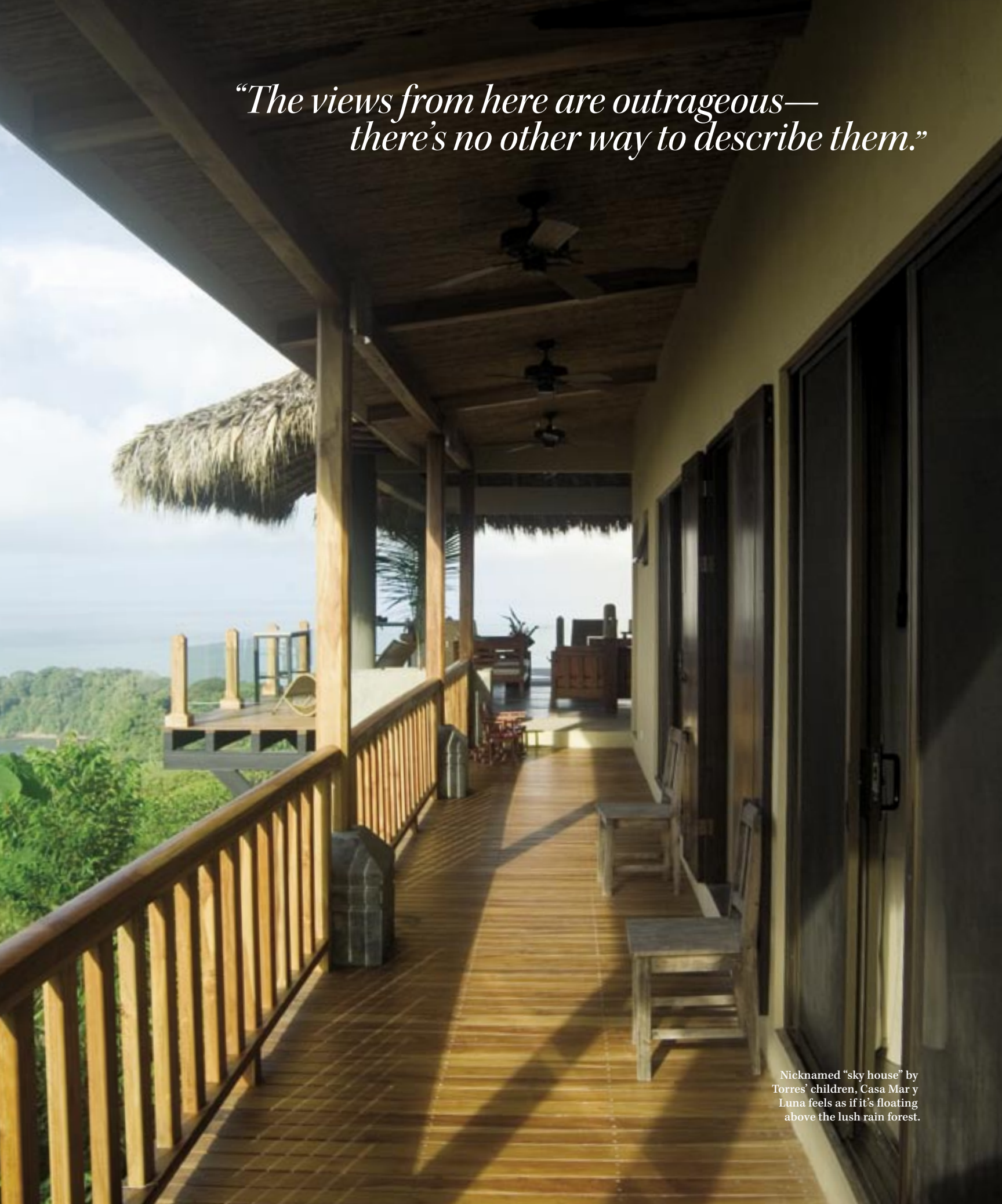
remarkable location, in the Marina District just opposite the Palace of Fine Arts and a short distance from the beach at Crissy Field. Torres asked Gamboa to help with the

interior design for what he calls the "forever house," and there is a decided continuity of style between it and Casa Mar y Luna.

Torres returns to Casa Mar y Luna once a month to oversee the operation of Kiana, and the entire family plans to spend every summer there as well as two weeks each winter. As they make the transition back to urban living, it's clear that the beach house, and the easygoing lifestyle at Dominical, has had a profound impact on them. "My daughter Kyra is so used to playing at the beach that now she just takes off her clothes and runs right into San Francisco Bay," laughs Torres. "She does not seem to notice how much colder it is!"

"Without a doubt, the rhythm of life [in Dominical] is very appealing," he says. "We can see toucans from our deck. I know what tide it is with my eyes closed, just by the sound of the waves breaking. And the toughest decision of the day is whether we should watch the sunset from the beach or our house." ■

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Nicknamed “sky house” by Torres’ children, Casa Mar y Luna feels as if it’s floating above the lush rain forest.