

# THE DECOR

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France, Vietnam,  
Costa Rica...



Bon  
Voyage!



Floored in cedar, the main room of Gabriela Valenzuela's Costa Rican villa features almond-wood columns, a white cement floor gleaming with pink shells, and furniture she designed. Above: Valenzuela en plein air. See Resources.



# jungle fever

When it's time for a little R&R, designer Gabriela Valenzuela heads to a Costa Rican hideaway that's a family affair

Written and produced by  
Mitchell Owens  
Photography by Pieter Estersohn  
Styled by Carlos Mota

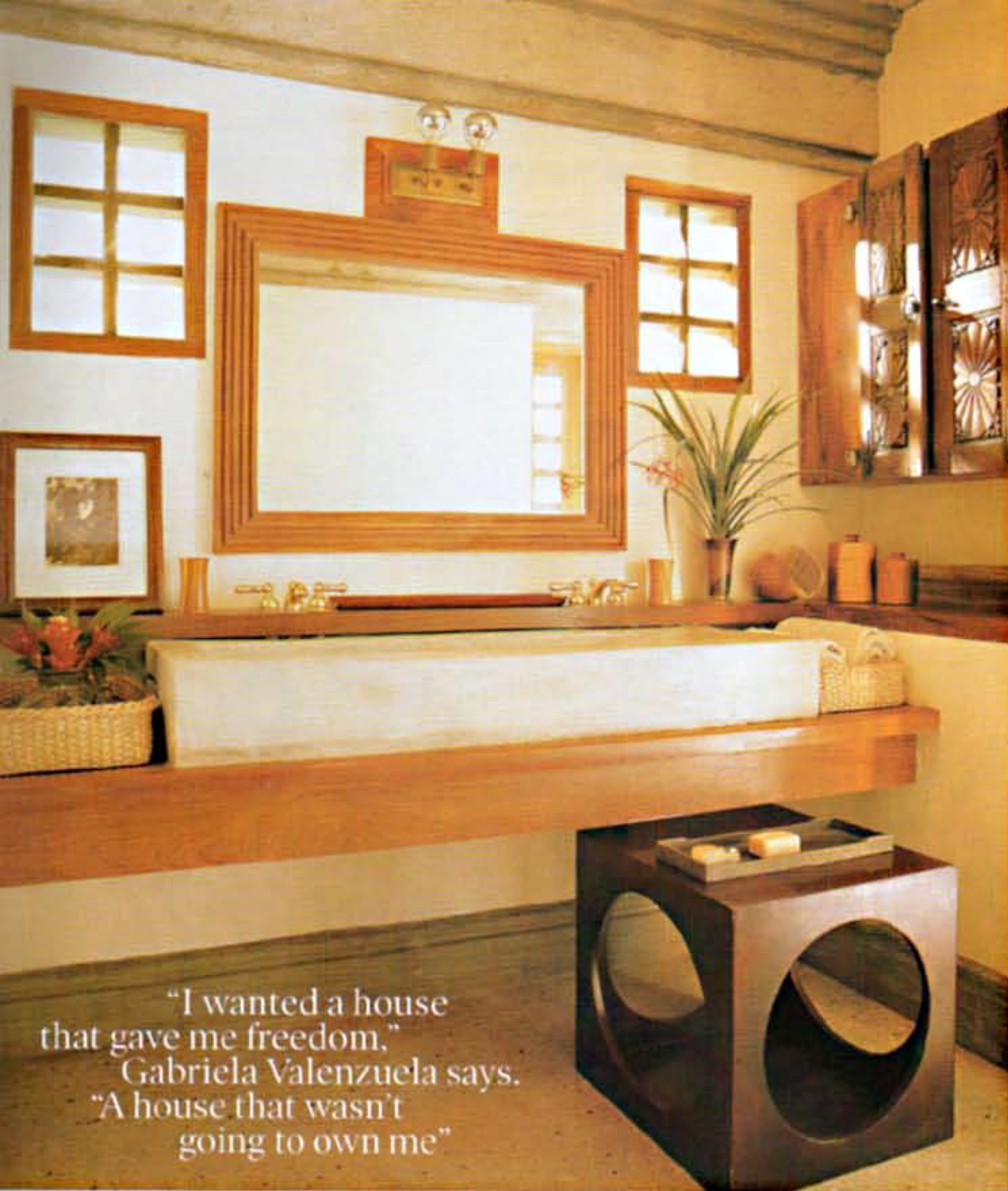


**T**wenty-odd years ago, Gabriela Valenzuela and a posse of school friends stumbled across Tamarindo, a jungle outpost on Costa Rica's Pacific coast. "It was fabulous," the designer says, misty-eyed but laughing. "The beach was the kind of place where you dream of having sex for the first time." That romantic teenage reverie came to mind when Valenzuela—the Costa Rican-born, New York-based founder of Heartwood, whose eco-friendly leather and wood furnishings and ceramics are carried from Bergdorf Goodman on Fifth Avenue to Waterworks nationwide—recently found herself

back in the neighborhood. But the seaside wildlife refuge that captured her adolescent fancy also has become—surprise!—the Central American nation's answer to Malibu. "Marisa Tomei has a house here," and a certain privacy-conscious Hollywood action star is building one nearby, says an astonished Valenzuela, whose Claudia Cardinal looks complement Tamarindo's silver-screen overtones. (Coincidentally, her Chilean-born father was a heartthrob of the Mexican cinema, and she briefly acted, too, working with Spanish director Carlos Saura.)

Clockwise from facing page: Valenzuela hosts an alfresco luncheon at a refectory table of guanacaste wood. A meal by local chef Shannon Peich is enhanced by Valenzuela-designed wood plates and candleholders; the designer's sister Monica Valenzuela designed the ceramic plates. The open-air studio has a cane-and-copper roof. An almond-wood trellis offers a distant ocean view. In the master bedroom, sunlit photographs hang above a wicker chaise; the curtains are Irish linen. See Resources.





"I wanted a house that gave me freedom," Gabriela Valenzuela says. "A house that wasn't going to own me"

She and her husband, Jerry Hirsch, the mind behind the fashion and home-furnishings company Go Silk, have also put down architectural roots in Tamarindo. Originally they planned a compound of "little houses surrounded by bamboo" to share with friends. Alas, the couple's pals proved less adventuresome than they had hoped. But that desire for a communal experience remained intact, so they decided to build a house called Villa Serena and make it a family affair.

Valenzuela's younger brother Abraham, an architect with a practice in San José, planned the house (he's also responsible for a Moroccan-style place being built for that secretive Tinseltown star). Elder brother Carlos, a tropical-plants expert, sculpted the land. Little sister Morica churned out the ceramic dinner plates, and Valenzuela herself designed the furniture, all constructed by Heartwood, which also operates a co-op for local artisans; the philanthropic designer is also involved with

the infant-nutrition La Leche League. And where was Hirsch during his home's gestation? Riding the waves on one of his vintage boards. His wife sighs, "I'm a surfing widow."

What she wanted was "a house that gave me freedom, that wasn't going to own me." Its structure would be a combination of utilitarian basics mixed with exotic matériel: polished cement, waxed stucco, local timber like guanacaste, and white cement floors sequined with thousands of surfer-dude puka shells gathered from the beach. In short, every inch intensely choreographed to look deceptively casual.

"She's a tough client," Abraham Valenzuela says. "She wanted it totally private but also completely open."

His solution was a three-bedroom retreat of interconnected wood-and-glass pavilions. Some, like the bedroom of Valenzuela and Hirsch's young daughter, are enclosed sanctuaries. Others are open air, like the studio where the lady of the house gives local children art lessons when she's not sketching with visiting friends. "Sometimes we get a really cute surfer to pose," says the effervescent Valenzuela, whose sensuous wood sculptures were showcased last spring at Breukelen in Manhattan's historic meatpacking district.

Villa Serena is an "architecture of discovery," Abraham Valenzuela says, that observation underscored by the Bali Hai-style grounds: a series of gently rising terraces planted with fragrant ylang-ylang trees and glittering with ornamental pools. "You walk through the garden to a building with a closed façade," he adds. "Then you step through the door into a high open space, then into a very low space, and so on." And built into every room is a surprise. In particular, the ceilings, the prima donnas of the house, where heights are as varied as the materials: caña brava, a stout bamboo-like reed, shelters the studio, while a wood trellis in the master bath lets steam escape and sunlight stream in.

Tropicals luxe and special effects aside, Gabriela Valenzuela admits that she wouldn't have appreciated Villa Serena when she was young and impatient, with Yves Saint Laurent stiletto-heeled boots on her feet and visions of Paris in her head.

"Costa Rica was so slow, I couldn't stand it," she says. "But now I come here and find myself thinking better things. There are no magazines to distract or cell phones interrupting. Jerry and I spend so much time here, we feel like sore thumbs back home in Southampton. But it's really the nicest life." ■

