

Azúcar

The founders of the ultrahip Mexican hotels CONDESAdf and Habita have now created Hotel Azucar, named for the sugar cane grown in the Gulf state of Veracruz, where their latest hideaway is located. The sweet brainchild of hotelier Carlos Couturier, the resort focuses on effortless elegance and a fusion with nature. Step in and step back in time to a place of breathtaking natural beauty as you saunter through the 20 low-lying whitewashed *palapas*, (bungalows) each topped with a thatched roof and having a private, intimate terrace overlooking the stunning Gulf of Mexico. Just one look at the blues of sky and sea, and guests are overcome by an atmosphere that is airy, breezy and easy.

Shaped by curved walls, the spare white-on-white interiors are simple to the extreme, but possess a kind of authentic style that both hearkens to the past and fulfils the modern traveller's style demands. "I see my hotel as an ecological, organic project. It is a design hotel yet it is somehow anti-design. I wanted to recuperate a lifestyle gone by – that of my grandparents – and give guests the pleasures of simple things," says Couturier, mentioning that the chairs found in each bungalow are reproductions of those his grandparents – who came to Veracruz from France in the 1930s to grow vanilla – had in their ranch.

Other elements, some with interesting back-stories, also meld a contemporary feel with often-handmade local flavour. The red-cedar woodwork in the private spaces comes, in fact, from driftwood that Couturier collected from the beach with his tractor after a major flood in Veracruz in 1999. It is a quirky display of hands-on design with a new-historical twist: "I stored the wood away for years until I founded Azucar. I decided to use much of it as supports for the beds or as beams and door frames," says the hotelier. In the bathrooms, sinks and shower doors are in the same fibreglass that local fishermen's boats are made of, giving them a translucent, modern look when the light shines through them. Each bungalow is named after a Veracruz sugar mill, and a locally made hammock stretches across every private patio, inviting guests to swing away as the Gulf breezes blow.

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Public spaces are largely open-air, like the relaxing *biblioteca* (library) where guests can lounge in wicker chairs or on pink pillows under jug lamps hanging from an open thatched ceiling, or an outdoor spa that features a yoga space and a wide array of holistic spa services. Visitors can take a dip in a funky pool whose deck is bedecked with sunbleached pink beanbags, and after exploring the nearby archaeological ruins 30 minutes to the north or the charming village of San Rafael, they can dine on catch-of-the-day seafood at almost cartoon-like colourless furniture in the hotel's sugar-white restaurant.

Azucar's simplicity offsets its luscious surroundings, but it's all like a sweet treat that keeps you coming back for more. "The hotel is all about going back to basics, to one's roots," says Couturier, summing up both the hotel's attributes and its, well, tributes: It claims to be a "tribute to the sugar industry, forgotten talents, and those who are still present; a tribute to what is ours; the smell of a humid field, the *sombrero* (Mexican hat), *huarache* (Mexican sandal), and *machete* (Mexican cutting knife)." It is also a tribute to Celia Cruz – the Cuban salsa diva who sang a song dedicated to the sweet white stuff – and peppered many others – with the simple word: *Azucar!* It is a word that implies energy, enthusiasm, joie de vivre – all things emanating from this stylish retreat

The sweet brainchild of hotelier Carlos Couturier and named for the sugar industry that still dominates the surrounding landscape of Veracruz, Hotel Azucar focuses on effortless elegance and fusion with nature in 20 separate bungalows that meld handmade simplicity with smooth curves and minimalist yet rustic design. The whitewashed, thatched spaces offer supreme simplicity and stunning views of the Gulf of Mexico.

Hotel Azucar

Veracruz

Opening date: 12/2005

Architecture: Elias Adam and Jose Robredo

Design: Carlos Couturier

Rooms: 20

Rates: 120 USD – 420 USD

Address: Carr. Federal Nautla-Poza Rica, Monte Gordo, Veracruz, Mexico.

www.hotelazucar.com