



Photography courtesy of Mar de Jade

# Passion with Purpose

*Mar de Jade retreat center helps grow community and service in rural Mexico*

by Abby Hart

Nestled in the sleepy fishing village of Chacala, Mexico, Mar de Jade is not a typical yoga retreat center. Of course, it does have the modern conveniences of a four-star yoga retreat locale: warm wood yoga studios bathed in sunlight streaming in from floor-to-ceiling windows; a luxe full-service spa; kitchens bursting with fresh, organic cuisine; and beautiful guest rooms in a sprawling stucco structure set on a peaceful beach, surrounded by lush jungle and soothing silence.

But look a little closer, and you'll find that the retreat center is one part of a whole, a collection of community projects intentionally undertaken to serve the fishing community of Chacala and the surrounding farming town.

Laura del Valle founded Mar de Jade in 1980, when she was 32. As a physician, educated in Chicago and in

Mexico City, she came to the village of Chacala in search of a different type of medical career, separate from large medical institutions and hospital systems.

"You have an idea of what you're going to go and do... and then the crooked finger of fate comes and gives you something you could have never imagined," del Valle says, telling the story of Mar de Jade during one of her animated retreat orientations. "You say something simple like, 'Oh, I want to be a doctor in a rural poor area,' and then you get there, and you say, 'Oh my God, I had no idea what the world would open up to me.'"

Informed and inspired by her Zen Buddhist practice and her medical profession, del Valle knew she wanted Mar de Jade to provide a serene refuge for visitors as well to address the needs of the surrounding impoverished community.

Mar de Jade began by opening a primary care clinic for locals. As an associate professor at University of California at San Francisco, del Valle ran the clinic, where medical students from UCSF would receive credit for their rotations. Over the years, the community projects have included, among others, a human rights group, a sewing co-op and a citizen education program.

## Living to Serve

The projects Mar de Jade has developed have resulted from paying attention to the community and its needs. Currently, in addition to the retreat center, Mar de Jade supports an organic farm, a school and an after-school program, with more projects in progress.

Angelica del Valle, Laura's daughter, has worked at the resort since 2006. After growing up on the grounds and leaving Mexico to attend college at Brown University, she couldn't resist the pull of the village. What she



intended to be a short stint back in Chacala has turned into 10 years answering the call to serve, while working with her mother to run the business at Mar de Jade.

"Once I realized everything that needed to be done [at Mar de Jade], I took on more," Angelica explains. "Then I got married, and looked around and thought, 'Wow, this is actually a great life. Why would I want to live anywhere else?'"

Angelica explains that Mar de Jade is a family business, consisting of a small group of people, with projects growing organically from this group. She runs the administrative activities of the retreat center, while her husband and her mother work on the community projects.

In 2013, the del Valles opened a school in Chacala called El Jardin. When they realized the need for a good school in the village, the del Valles began researching educational methods and decided upon a combination of the Waldorf and Montessori ones. This unique blend of teaching styles allows children to experience individualized education, and encourages kids to grow and learn at their own pace. Currently teaching 30 children from pre-kindergarten through fourth grade, El Jardin will expand to include fifth and sixth grade this fall.

## Sowing the Seeds for Growth

El Rancho "Don Chon," an organic farm, is another of

the Mar de Jade community projects. Set on 18 acres about a 20-minute drive from the retreat center, the farm is a model of self-sustaining organic farming. Staffed by an agronomist and several full-time farmers, the farm also provides employment for local families and presents an opportunity for vacationers to volunteer.

In addition to becoming delicious, healthy dishes in the retreat center kitchen, the fruits and vegetables of El Rancho's labor are turned into organic products such as luscious tropical fruit marmalades, salsa and peanut butter in the food processing workshop.

The farm began in 2008 as a response to the lack of organic farming in the state, as well as the abundance of mono-cultured crops creating soil erosion and the prevalence of pesticides. It demonstrates that organic biodiversity is possible, provides steady employment to the families of the community and models how to give added value to local crops through food processing.

## A Vision for the Future

The Mar de Jade grounds weren't always active with yoga retreat-goers, vacationers and project volunteers. "Back in the old days, Mar de Jade was on a very dusty road and 45 minutes through the jungle to get to the retreat center. Most of the people who showed up were adventurers seeking a rustic jungle experience off the beaten track," del Valle remembers. A paved road created in the early 2000s gave greater access to the resort, but even today, Chacala remains a tiny tourism and fishing

town with a population of 300 to 400.

In contrast, the larger farming town of Las Varas, 15 minutes inland, experiences the obstacles created by the seasonality of the farming industry. With a population of about 20,000, Las Varas sees migrants from other states who come to work the farms in the busier seasons. During the down seasons, when work is scarce, under-educated adolescents face few options—either attempting to enter the U.S. in search of a better life, or getting involved in the drug trade. As a result, the dropout rate for high school-aged youth in Nayarit, the Mexican state where Chacala is located, is about 40 percent.

"As things are, there isn't a whole lot of hope for the youth," acknowledges Angelica. The del Valles' solution to this problem is to create a trades and arts school, "Aldea de Jovenes" (Youth Village), at the organic farm. The idea is to give adolescents skills for life, to earn a livelihood and to make smart choices in this challenging environment. It will offer skilled trades, formal education, art and recreation and entrepreneurship. Students will also receive training in self-reflection, emotional intelligence and mindfulness through integration of yoga, meditation and other practices. The del Valles have already equipped an industrial carpentry workshop, and are now seeking help to buy equipment for food processing and the expansion of an existing building for classrooms, offices, a dining room and a yoga hall. The launch date for Youth Village is tentatively





scheduled for November 2016, pending funding and financial support.

#### Bringing Community and Service to Life

How do the del Valles make these projects happen? They are mostly subsidized and funded by about 40 percent of the profits from the Mar de Jade retreat center. The del Valles and Angelica's husband donate their time to overseeing the operation of the community projects in addition to running Mar de Jade. Last year, the Tides Foundation in San Francisco agreed to become Mar de Jade's fiscal sponsor and provide tax-deductible receipts to those who donate to the community projects.

Though Mar de Jade is split between a retreat center, an organic farm, a school and the upcoming trade school, its core mission is simple: to build bridges between cultures and people. "It's a supportive environment where people can have the time to explore their creativity, awareness and compassion. This intimacy brings people back year after year," says Angelica. "We feel so grateful for the many guests who have contributed not only to the continuous growth of Mar de Jade but to the well-being of the larger community."

Angelica acknowledges that Mar de Jade has blurred the line between tourism and community service. "It's not just a business, but it's not just a non-profit either. It's where business has a social purpose. It's the spirit of awareness and community that is infused in the place," she observes. "Things might not be perfect, we're always

battling against the elements—we're right between the ocean and the jungle. But [Mar de Jade] has so much more richness and meaning for us and for our guests because of the commitment to help as we can, to live with open hearts, and to invite guests to join us in creating a home for all."

*To learn more about Mar de Jade community projects and retreats, and how to donate to or volunteer for their community projects, visit [illuminemagazine.net](http://illuminemagazine.net).*

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