

An open door in paradise

WRITTEN BY CRIS CADIZ

In 2018, Gail Rakitnich and Brian Degerness were ready to “escape the rat race” of living in the United States to seek adventure and see the world. No strangers to hospitality and customer service—having owned bars, restaurants and a gym in Oregon—they planned to become expat entrepreneurs. They had set their sights on Ecuador and hired a realtor to help find an ideal property. Then, they got sidetracked in Costa Rica, where their dreams became curiously entangled with another expat’s dream at a place called Mango Tree Villas.

This small hotel is located on the southern Pacific coast, a region known for beaches, jungle, and Marino Ballena National Park, a marine conservation area where whales migrate and turtles nest. Mango Tree Villas was run-down but had potential. “We looked at each other and said, ‘I think we can do this!’ ... It was kind of a dare,” Brian admits, laughing. His background was in buying failing businesses, making them successful and then selling them, while Gail had a career in customer service. Always active and fit, Gail had fallen in love with yoga at age 18 and practiced off and on for 50 years. In 2013, an unexpected career turn and some free time allowed her to follow her dream to become a yoga instructor. Mango Tree Villas was an ideal facility in which to teach and certify



Mango Tree Villas owners Gail Rakitnich and Brian Degerness. PHOTO BY CRIS CADIZ

other yoga teachers, so she completed the rigorous 500-hour program in Costa Rica. "I only have this window of time left to have adventures, so we need to do it now," Gail had told Brian. She wanted a place to offer yoga and wellness retreats. Brian wanted to be in the jungle and have lots of projects. Mango Tree Villas was perfect.

Close enough to the Costanera Highway for easy access but situated in a tiny village called Tres Ríos, Mango Tree Villas perches on a steep, jungle-covered hillside above a huge, old mango tree. The location offers peace, serenity, natural beauty, wildlife and tropical breezes. Nearby are miles of nearly deserted beaches, rivers, waterfalls and places to hike. Good restaurants and other activities are available in neighboring towns. "This place has good energy," said Gail. "Everyone who comes here says that."

Mango Tree Villas was built by an American expat around 2007. She was an older single woman, an artist and a bit eccentric, according to locals. The hotel had become too much for her to manage and she decided to sell. Gail and Brian were interested, and the time had come to negotiate a price.

It was sunset. The local expat ritual was to watch nature's nightly show and toast to Costa Rican paradise. Gail, Brian, their realtor, and the owner sat on the patio of Mango Tree. They were about to raise a glass to sunset and a handshake deal, which they would officially seal the following day. Suddenly, the owner suffered what seemed like a seizure. They rushed her to the hospital where she was pronounced deceased.

Shocked and saddened by the turn of events, Gail and Brian contacted the owner's children, who couldn't come to Costa Rica. Not knowing what else to do, they jumped in to help staff run the hotel until things were sorted out. The local expat community started to arrive to see what had happened. "Well, who are you?" Brian recalled them asking him. "I said, 'I'm Brian.' They said, 'Oh, you're Brian.... She said you were the ones—you were going to take her dream and make it come true.'"

The Mango Tree's owner had two daughters who lived in the northwestern United States, coincidentally close to Gail and Brian's home. The daughters asked them to bring some of their mother's jewelry, artwork and pictures as remembrances. When they all met back in the States, Gail

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Nauyaca Waterfalls. PHOTO BY KIM HORN



ABOVE Drone photo of Mango Tree Villas and its open air yoga studio. PHOTO BY BRIAN DEGERNESS

BELOW Women celebrating in the sea during Journey to Enlightenment Retreat at Mango Tree Villas. PHOTO BY KIM HORN

OPPOSITE TOP Jungle view from the rancho at Mango Tree Villas, PHOTO BY CRIS CADIZ

OPPOSITE MIDDLE View of the pool and mural painted by a local artist, PHOTO BY KIM HORN

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Yoga and Adventure Retreat at Mango Tree Villas, PHOTO BY KIM HORN



and Brian told them the entire story, including the odd limbo of the business deal. The daughters asked Gail and Brian if they still wanted to buy Mango Tree Villas. "Our mother told us you were the ones. If you want to do this, we'll do everything we can to help you."

"It was an interesting start, said Brian wryly. By July of 2018, they were owners. "Behind the scenes the place was a wreck but functional," said Brian, who called the renovation process "triage." They entertained their first guests in November. Then, with COVID sweeping the world, the government shut them down for 10 months. "When it hit, we were banging on all eight cylinders," he recalls. "The place was full, and we had booked back-to-back retreats." While they waited for tourists to return, renovations continued. Brian also built Gail a beautiful open-air yoga studio. When they reopened, it was for a 45-person local wedding. Today, after three years, the only major project left is to build their own house, for more privacy—plus rebuild their business during a pandemic that won't quit.

While they continue to book hotel guests, most currently from Europe, Gail and Brian are far from a goal of hosting 10 retreats a year. Three of four planned for 2022 were canceled because of travel uncertainty. They do have interest from local instructors who don't have the facilities to offer a retreat experience. Whether local or from abroad, instructors or retreat organizers can rent the whole facility to run their own

program. They can choose services provided a la carte by Mango Tree, such as a chef, massage therapist, spa treatments, or excursions. Mango Tree Villas would also lend itself to other retreat experiences, such as writing, art, photography, birding. "We get used to it but the pure and the energy of this place, really touches people," Gail said. Mango Tree Villas' all-inclusive retreats are a boutique experience, including everything from lodging to healthy meals to transportation to COVID testing and excursions. "It's important for people to know that yoga is for everybody," Gail said. "People see 'yoga retreat' and they think they can't do it. But you listen to your body and do what's right for you and have fun. The focus is on wellness—health first, yoga second. It's about nurturing and nourishing."

Despite the strange route to becoming caretakers of the Mango Tree Villas dream and the challenges of the pandemic, Gail and Brian are happy and confident in their future success. "I don't know if there's a grand design, but I do believe in open doors," said Brian. Like many expats, they heard the "Are you crazy?!" response from friends and family at their plans. "It doesn't matter how old you are," said Gail, "if you want adventure, if you have a dream, you just have to follow it."

To learn more about retreats or book a stay with Gail and Brian in their Costa Rican paradise, visit themangotreevillasandspa.com. 

