

Perspective

'Earthship' Takes Sustainability to Next Level

By Wes Rundle

Fifteen kilometers south of Nicaragua's famous San Juan del Sur exists the small community of El Carizal. Tucked away under canopies rich with Howler Monkeys and Scarlett Macaws, the residents of this tranquil paradise enjoy a lifestyle occupied with leisure and relaxation.

This laid-back tempo is appreciated by the children who spend most of their time playing in the river, and the older generations who spend most of their time watching the children. But for those with responsibilities of providing, the lack of activity makes finding work a challenging and complicated task.

In January a team of energetic and highly skilled adventurers came to El Carizal with strange ideas and grand ambitions. They began a truly revolutionary project and what began as an "Earthship" project now known as "Casa Llanta," or house of tires.

The idea behind an Earthship is simple: A self-sustained facility that allows you to live simply and free.

Although living simply can sometimes be made complicated, these pioneers have developed a lifestyle free of excess by utilizing the energy given to them from nature.

Solar panels collect the sun's energy, which is stored and used to power all electrical devices. Water catchment systems take advantage of Nicaragua's high quantity of rainfall by keeping it in large cisterns, while water reclamation systems process used water and transport it to green houses filled with fruit trees and vegetable gardens.

This modest approach to life leads in turn to freedoms not commonly known in today's world. By becoming self-reliant and self-sustaining the people of El Carizal have the freedom to enjoy the true serenity of Nicaragua's Pacific Coast.

In addition to responsible living, these pioneers have developed a sustainable infrastructure made almost entirely of recycled and renewable materials. The walls of these houses are built from tires that have been filled then pressed with earth.

For walls needing less structural stability, adobe and bottles are used to create an aesthetic beauty not yet discovered by con-



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Recycled House: The Earthship house, known as "Casa Llanta," is built with all recycled materials, including this wall of adobe and glass bottles.

ventional building. It is this connection to both earth and beauty that attracts people; it is from their conventionality that motivation and inspiration are drawn.

These structures are inexpensive to build and the materials used to create them are both readily available and in gross excess; the time required to build this way is minimal and easy to follow.

In El Carizal these techniques are now in abundant practice and known to many.

The Casa Llanta project is led by two U.S. citizens, Dave Kniffin and Tim Kelly, who began working on the project last January. These friends combined their two passionate interests into the project: Living "off-grid," in a house free of company-owned electrical wires and water; and the widening of cultural understanding through community development.

Knowing their goals were both groundbreaking and ambitious, they brought in a team of specialists to help them start the

project and teach the crew of hired community members. These specialists included legendary architect Michael Reynolds, originator of the Earthship, and a team of 11 hand-picked, highly experienced builders.

Together, Reynolds and his team have traveled the world building Earthships for both developing and developed countries alike. Following this model of travel and

education Reynold's team has visited more than a dozen countries, including Jamaica, Mexico and France.

In 2005, in the aftermath of the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake and the ensuing tsunami, they volunteered their efforts in disaster relief by building houses and conducting seminars on how to collect, clean and store rainwater.

In El Carizal, work has been a collaborative effort. Inspired by the genius of the architecture and the unofficial Earthship dogma of living simply and free, volunteers have come from all over the world to donate their time, learn what they can and share in this remarkable experience.

From college professors to shoe-string backpackers, the Casa Llanta project has captured not only the attention but also the imagination of almost everyone who finds out about it. This labor of love is not singularly designed by expats and foreigners, but is freely given back by the members of "El Carizal" as well.

On hot days, women and children bring treats for their neighbors and guests. After school, students from Escuela Carlos Guzmán run to help carry tires or bottles.

This is a community dedicated to the new direction of itself.

Wes Rundle, 25, was introduced to the Casa Llanta Project by his sister, Brooke Rundle, a real estate agent for Coldwell Banker in San Juan del Sur. Through the project he has developed a friendship with Tim Kelly and Dave Kniffin and plans to move back to Nicaragua to build his own Earthship.

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