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Guest Book: A risk-taker with designs on Panama

By Nancy Beth Jackson International Herald Tribune

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AZUERO, Panama Gilles Saint-Gilles has designed boutiques for Jean-Louis Scherrer, palaces for Arab princes and apartments for New York socialites, but two years ago he shuttered his studio on Avenue Montaigne in Paris, not to retire but to take a chance.

"A little bit of insecurity is very important," he said, reclining in the Japanese teahouse he built on a hilltop here. "If you want to be creative, you have to like a little insecurity. Too well-installed, you lose the power of youth."

Now 60, Saint-Gilles vacationed in Panama nine years ago and discovered the Azuero Peninsula, which juts into the Pacific roughly midway between Panama City and the Costa Rican border. Its rolling land, climate and calm reminded him of Tuscany. "It changed my life for me," he said.

He saw the landscape as a canvas where he could create a beachfront community of luxurious villas and began buying tracts of land that would total 450 hectares, or 1,100 acres, near the fishing village of Pedasi. Three years later he brought craftsmen from France to train local artisans and began building Azueros.

His emphasis on craftsmanship grew from his studies at École Boulle, the elite cabinet-making school he entered at age 14. Some Beaux Arts classes followed, but earning a living had to come before his first love, painting. Then the "fairy tale," as he calls it, began.

Learning that Scherrer needed a design for a boutique on the rue de Rivoli, the 19-year-old boldly applied, presenting a successful model two days later. The project led to more boutiques and introductions to the designer's clients, including a Russian princess who became Saint-Gilles's first wife.

"He was very precocious and talented. When he was 20 years old, he knew what he wanted to do with his life," said William Beadleston, a retired New York art dealer, one of Saint-Gilles's clients. "He has done it all himself with tremendous risk always."

What ties all his designs together, he said, is not subscribing to a particular school, but "to absorb what has been done and create something personal."

He now spends weekdays in the Panamanian capital, working out of his new studio, a wooden building of Canal Zone vintage, on projects that include a palace in Jidda. On the weekends, he boards a chartered plane with his wife Camille, whom he married after his first wife died, and heads for Azueros. He already has completed a guesthouse and his own villa, where he now finds time to paint.

Construction has begun on the first enclave of beach villas, but Azueros is one project that he is not rushing to finish. He is taking his time on this canvas. "I didn't come from Paris to change a place I like. We don't have to cut the branch where we sit," he said.