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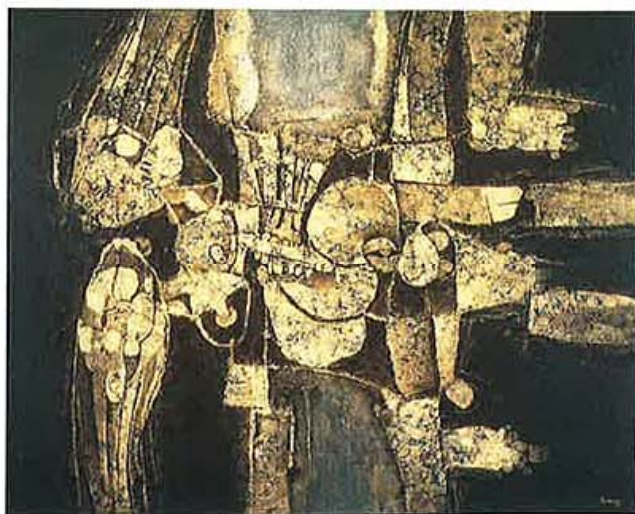
CESAR MANRIQUE'S ISLAND SHRINE

By Yvonne Courtney
Photography by Pedro Albornoz

Some of the most powerful modern architecture has been animated by primitive undercurrents. For architect Cesar Manrique, inspiration came from the earth itself: his native island of Lanzarote. One of the Canary Islands off Morocco, Lanzarote is a stark wonderland of hidden grottoes, vertiginous cliffs and rocky plains forged by powerful volcanic eruptions in the 18th century that blanketed three-quarters of the island with lava.

Manrique (1919–92) first achieved fame as an abstract painter in Europe, moving in circles that included everyone from Miró and Picasso to Andy Warhol. But in 1968, he returned to Lanzarote and embarked on a project that would consume the last 24 years of his life: transforming the island into his own version of utopia. A major component of this work was overseeing the development of Lanzarote, which had long suffered from poverty and outmigration, into a prosperous tourist destination whose infrastructure and attractions would harmonize, both in form and spirit, with the island's raw beauty.

Manrique's mark is everywhere, as much in his creations — restaurants, gardens, a contemporary art museum, housing developments, public sculptures — as in things he left alone, such as a volcanic canyon which, in spite of local opposition, even ridicule, he managed to preserve as a national park. What distinguishes his interventions is



Above Cesar Manrique, *Enterrados (Buried)*, 1974. Mixed media and acrylic on canvas.

Top Manrique on Lanzarote around 1979.

Opposite Mirador del Rio (1973), near Orzola, with its windows looking out to sea.





his lightness of hand. Fascinated by the natural topography of the island, he used it as ready-made, organic architecture, much as Lanzarote's early inhabitants once did, turning subterranean volcanic bubbles into rooms joined by rocky tunnels and lit by natural openings overhead, or tucking structures into outcroppings so that they virtually disappear.

Manrique embraced this "found architecture" just as Modernism was morphing into its late 1960s and 1970s aesthetic of organic forms and psychedelics, and his creations seem inspired as much by those architectural trends as by the natural shapes of the half-hidden caves; the influence of the wild, sensuous Art Nouveau style of Antonio Gaudí — the architect he most admired — is also evident. At the same time, Manrique drew from the island's stark vernacular style which developed in response to its hot, arid and windy climate: the interconnected, thick-walled, whitewashed cubes — each containing one room — with small windows to keep the interior cool, are arrayed around courtyards that provide outdoor space sheltered from the wind. While he integrated the island's geological and architectural peculiarities into his own emotionally charged style, Manrique also helped to ensure their preservation by drawing up architectural guidelines that included banning billboards, limiting new structures to the color white and a height of two stories, and other environmentally sound practices that came to define Lanzarote.

Manrique was born to a middle-class family in Lanzarote's capital, Arrecife, when donkey carts were the fastest mode of transport. He was not an outstanding pupil, but he amazed his teachers with his talent for drawing. If Arrecife's provincial and isolated setting might have seemed an unlikely stimulant to creativity, Manrique found inspiration for his sculptures and designs in the port's tinsmith shops and shipyards. But it was Famara, a village on the island's north coast, where the Atlantic rollers crash onto smooth, black rocks beneath towering cliffs, that most enthralled him and would eventually draw him back to the island. "I have always had the impression that Lanzarote is no longer part of this world, if it ever was..." Manrique explained to an art critic in Madrid in 1955.



Above Passage to a bubble lounge in Taro de Tahiche, Manrique's own residence.

Below A staircase leads down from ground level to a series of volcanic bubble lounges at Taro de Tahiche.

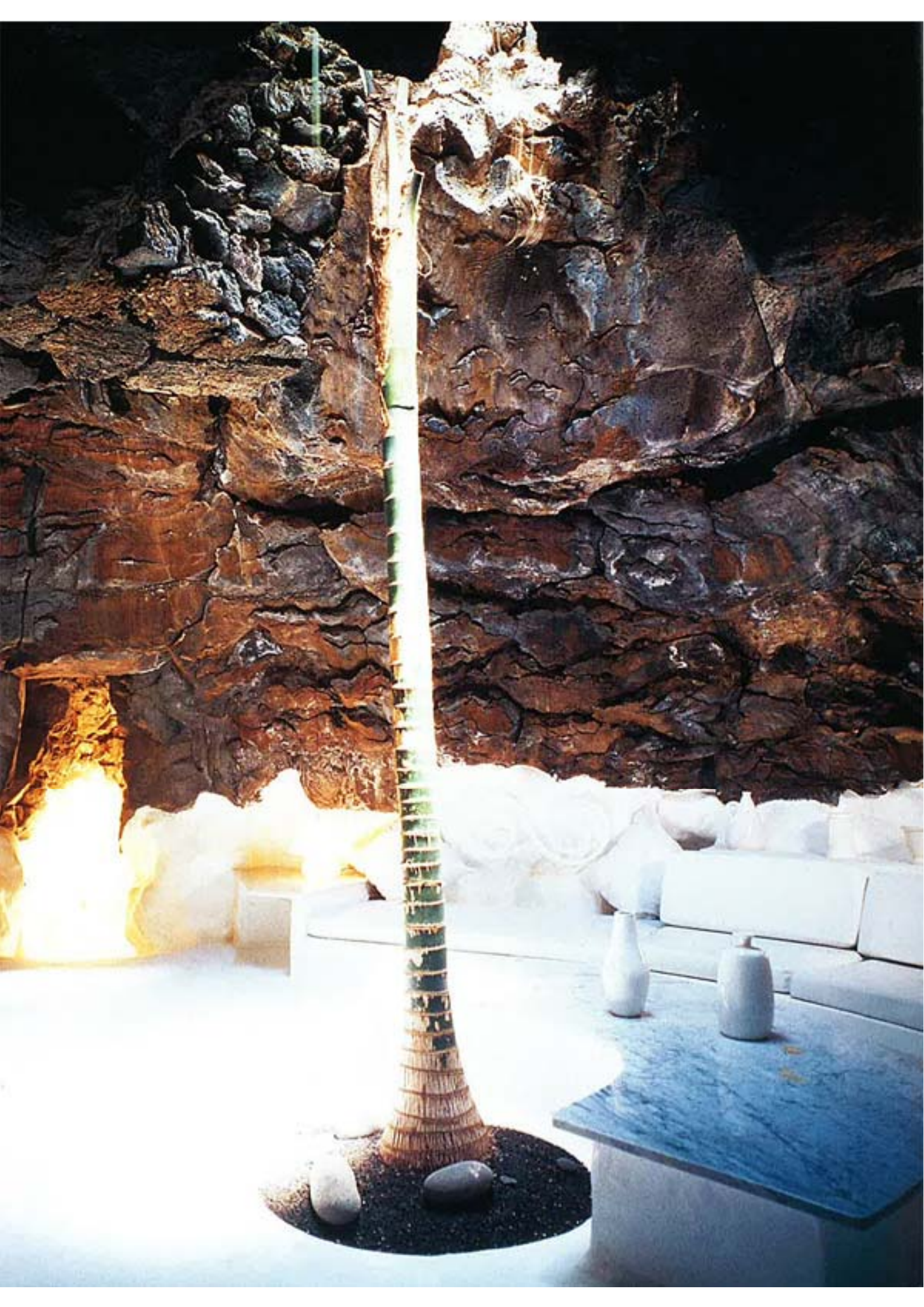
Opposite top The white skyline of Taro de Tahiche, set within the lava flow

Opposite bottom A former living area in Taro de Tahiche, flooded with daylight, is now a gallery space with works from Manrique's collection of 20th-century artists.











Above The sunken garden grotto at Taro de Tahiche is accessible through a passageway from the adjacent bubble lounges.

Opposite The "Red Bubble" lounge in Taro de Tahiche, with a circular wooden seat around a fig tree adorned with straw bird mobiles by Manrique. The sculpture on the plinth is also by Manrique. The banquettes, carved out of the volcanic rock, are softened with red leather cushions.

"What I take from the scenery is its dramatic feeling, its essence, which is what really matters." Famara was also where he met Pepin Ramirez, who would become his lifelong friend, and who later, as Lanzarote's Island Council President, would approve Manrique's ideas for preserving and transforming the island.

Manrique first left Lanzarote at the age of 19, in search of adventure; he found it in the form of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), fighting under Spain's dictator, General Franco. After the war, however, he became a staunch pacifist and refused ever to discuss his military service.

Upon his return to Lanzarote, he was expected, like all islanders, to farm the land or go into business like his father, a salesman, despite his demonstrable artistic talent. He compromised by studying architecture, deemed a proper profession, entering the Laguna Technical College on the neighboring island of Tenerife in 1945. But any parental attempts to dissuade Manrique from painting proved futile. Seduced by 19th-century Canarian painter Nestor de la Torre's murals in the Casino in Tenerife's capital city, Santa Cruz, he left for Madrid, where he graduated from the San Fernando Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes in 1950. With fellow artists and friends Miró, Matisse and Picasso, Manrique was at the forefront of the European abstract art movement of the 1950s, co-founding, with art critic Manolo Conde and painter Fernando Mignoni, the Fernando Fe Gallery, one of Spain's first venues dedicated to non-figurative art after the civil war. He was selected to take part in the Venice Biennial in 1955 and again in 1960, participated in several group shows in Europe and South America and had solo exhibitions in Madrid

and Paris. He also received corporate commissions, including murals, sculptures, lighting designs and other fittings for Madrid's Fenix Hotel.

In 1964, Nelson Rockefeller, who had bought some of Manrique's work, invited him to New York. The artist was seeking new stimuli and the American metropolis could not have differed more from the relatively muted city of Madrid. Meeting Abstract Expressionist, Pop and Kinetic artists, such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Warhol, played a major role in the evolution of Manrique's style. In New York, he produced his first collages while also developing ideas for sculptures, murals and interior design projects which he would later execute in Lanzarote. He signed up with New York's Catherine Viviano Gallery where he had three successful solo exhibitions. Manrique found living in New York enlightening, admiring the city's cultural drive and liberal atmosphere. At the same time, however, he sensed a lack of spirituality in its artificial and competitive environment. "My truth is in Lanzarote," he wrote in his diary, and, in 1968, he finally returned to the island for good.

Manrique had visited the island often since his departure in 1945, and had even produced some commissions there, such as murals for Guacimeta airport (1953). He had always shown an interest in Lanzarote's future, in particular how new construction might be shaped to harmonize with its geology. When he returned to live there, he found Lanzarote at an important historic juncture: Like other places in Spain, the island had just started to develop the new industry of tourism — seen as the solution for its endemic poverty — with the enthusiastic approval of its

inhabitants. Manrique understood that the island's abundant sun, dramatic scenery and unspoiled beaches would attract sun-starved Europeans in droves. He recognized the potential benefits of tourism, but he also feared its consequences and determined to find a way to make Lanzarote a tourist destination without compromising its unusual beauty. He began a study of Lanzarote's vernacular architecture, which culminated in his 1974 book, *Lanzarote, Arquitectura Inedita* (Lanzarote, Untold Architecture), a guide for appreciating the simplicity and logic of the island's traditional architecture.

Manrique's first architectural project on the island was his own home and studio, Taro de Tahiche (Tahiche Cabin, 1968). After a long search for the perfect site, Manrique spotted the tip of a palm tree rising from a desolate, blackened field of lava. When he inquired about purchasing the plot, the owner thought he was crazy and gave him the land for nothing. From a distance, the house could be mistaken for any of the island's white cubic structures, with its cluster of rooms opening onto a central, open-air courtyard. However, it straddles five subterranean lava bubbles (formed by air trapped during volcanic eruptions) that Manrique linked with passageways to create a series of interconnected lounge pods. The structure is a marriage of island vernacular and 1960s

metropolitan chic: black Magistretti *Atollo* lamps, leather furniture, African sculptures and brightly colored ceramics contrast with the whitewashed or naturally gray volcanic rock walls.

Abundant natural light enters the ground-floor living room through large picture windows and travels down a spiral staircase to illuminate one of the bubbles in the netherworld of lava vaults below. The décor of each bubble has a unique color scheme: black, white, red, yellow and avocado (the latter derived its name from a solitary plant in situ). The bubbles feature cushioned concrete banquettes poured along the lava contours and built-in 1960s-style plastic furniture. The chain of bubbles leads to an enchanting light-filled sunken garden at the edge of the lava field, with a shallow pool carved out of the rock, surrounded by a profusion of lush greenery, suspended acrylic *Bubble* chairs by Eero Aarnio from 1968, and his 1967 *Pastil* chairs.

By the early 1970s, Lanzarote had become a millionaire's playground of high stakes poker games, luxury yachts and drunken camel races. Manrique was fully at home in this atmosphere and his sprawling "playboy mansion," strolling the lava fields naked, escorted by his huge hound, and playing host to celebrities such as Omar Sharif, Anthony Quinn, Peter Sellers, Warhol and Miró.

Below Jameos del Agua (1968), an entertainment center near Punta de Mujeres. Its picture-perfect pool – which only the King of Spain is permitted to swim in – is surrounded by tropical palms and cactus.



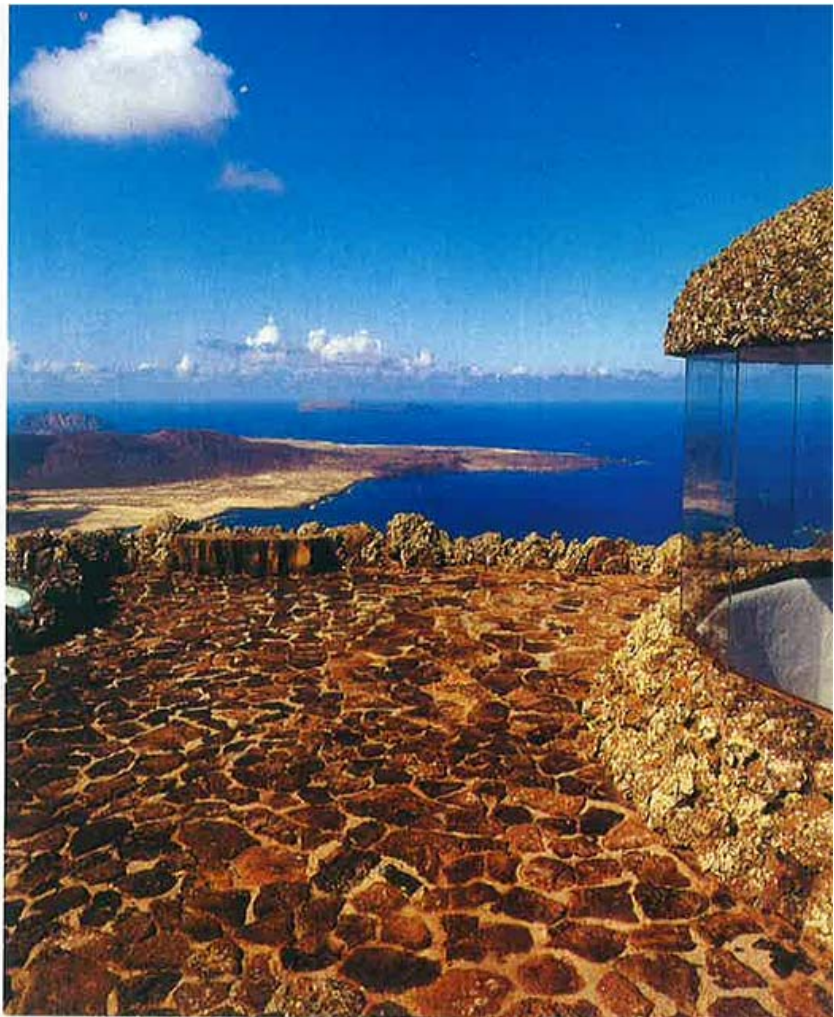
Top The roof of the Mirador del Rio bar and restaurant. The glass-walled, stone-topped "mushroom" to the right houses the staircase which spirals up from the café to a gift shop/seating area.

Bottom Mirador del Rio's sculpted staircase.

When actress Rita Hayworth visited Manrique's most famous masterpiece, the Jameos del Agua (Volcanic Water Cave, 1968), she told reporters that she had seen the Eighth Wonder of the World. Nature provided both the architecture and the interior decoration for this extraordinary cavern of surprises — an entertainment center, with a restaurant, bar, nightclub, water gardens and a concert hall, built into a horizontal underground volcanic tube — and Manrique interfered only minimally. The restaurant, in a natural hollow reached by a wooden staircase, overlooks an eerie seawater lake, infused with metallic hues of blue, turquoise and green by sunlight through a rooftop aperture. A narrow pathway runs along one side of the lake towards the dance floor and bar area carved out of the rock. Another set of steps curves back up towards ground level into the next bubble which contains an open-air garden, "Flintstone"-style bar stools made of rocks and a picture-perfect swimming pool where one can imagine girls in *Dr. No* bikinis.

The Mirador del Rio (Mirador Overlook, 1973), a mountaintop bar and cafeteria, offers fabulous vistas of the island from an altitude of 1,500 feet. With its earthy colors and textures, the building nearly disappears into the rocky landscape but for a circular window that hints at the promised view. To enhance the emotional impact, arrival is delayed by means of a long entrance passageway that winds past niches displaying ceramic vessels before finally opening into a large space with panoramic windows. Perhaps Manrique's most interesting architectural work, the Mirador features sculpted volumes that recall Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal at Kennedy Airport in New York. According to Manrique, the shapes of the windows of American cars that he observed in the U.S. in the 1960s provided inspiration.

If Manrique's Lanzarote projects are widely admired today, his ideas were not always immediately accepted by the island's residents; indeed, many were initially mocked. During his campaign in the late 1960s to declare Timanfaya, the island's largest concentration of volcanos, a national park, islanders sent Manrique postcards of Yosemite to show him what a real national park looked like. But today, the National Timanfaya Park — a barren, surrealist landscape worthy of Dalí — is the most popular destination on the island, attracting over one million visitors a year. NASA used to send its astronauts there for a moonscape preview, and the apocalyptic scenery served as a backdrop for Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.* Manrique's "Little Devil" signposts (made of wood from wrecked ships) lead through the park to the Manrique-designed restaurant, El Diablo (The Devil, 1970), a circular building resembling a spaceship, perched on top of a volcano. It offers dramatic 360 degree views over the fields of rocky devastation. Underground volcanic heat is used to power the kitchen's grills.





Above El Diablo restaurant.

Opposite The Jardín de Cactus's statue-like rock formations and circular roofed gift shop.

To add a compelling cultural component to the island's natural attractions, Manrique transformed the Castillo de San José (San José Castle, 1976), a stone fortress built in 1776 by King Carlos III of Spain to defend Arrecife's port against pirates, abandoned since 1890, into an impressive modern art museum. Manrique established its collection by exchanging his own canvases for paintings by friends, including Miró, Dalí and Diego Rivera. Inside, an undulating white staircase, made of timber slabs embedded in stucco, leads down to a restaurant with a monochromatic interior, originally furnished with Marcel Breuer tubular steel and black leather side chairs and black leather-topped tables.

Manrique collaborated on the Meliá Salinas hotel (1977) in Costa Tegüise by architect Fernando Higueras, designing its internal gardens, murals and pool. The island's first, and still most popular, luxury hotel, it is frequented by politicians, actors and pop stars. Manrique also designed an enclave of curvy, modernist bungalows in Famara in the late 1980s; today, they are highly sought after.

Manrique's final triumph was the Jardín de Cactus (Cactus Garden, 1990), a magical amphitheater carved out of a former stone quarry, where 10,000 succulents from the Canaries, Madagascar and the United States in myriad shapes and hues grow seductively along the terraces, and huge natural rust-colored basalt monoliths stand like statues. In a typical Manrique device, the entrance ticket booth hides what's in store, so that the visitor enjoys a powerful impact upon entering. His attention to detail is evident, right down to the bathroom symbols which cheekily echo the suggestiveness of the exotic succulents.

Manrique's organic approach, which he promoted singlemindedly, turned Lanzarote into an international model for integrating art and architecture with environmental sensitivity. Awarded the Europa Nostra Award in 1986 for conservation, Lanzarote was also declared a World Biosphere Reserve in 1993. Since Manrique's untimely death in a car accident in 1992, his guidelines have continued to shape development on the island with restraint and respect for nature. Tourist resorts are concentrated in three coastal hubs – Puerto del Carmen, Costa Tegüise and Playa Blanca – leaving the rest of the island relatively unspoiled. Manrique's home became the Cesar Manrique Foundation in 1992, and while little tangible sign of domesticity remains, with most furnishings removed (except inside the bubbles), the artist's models, sketches, architectural plans, paintings, ceramics and sculptures are displayed, alongside his private collection of artworks by Miró, Picasso and Antoni Tàpies, among others. The administrators of Manrique's estate are dedicated to fulfilling his vision for the island.

"Being born into this geology of burnt ashes in the middle of the Atlantic conditions any sensitive person," Manrique once said. But he alone endeavored to make its unusual beauty apparent to all. With vision and unerring taste, he created places imbued with humanity, joy and tranquility. ■

Yvonne Courtney ran a public relations agency, focusing on design and publishing, in London for 15 years. Now based in the Canary Islands, she writes for publications in the U.K., U.S. and Spain.

Photographs courtesy of Fundación Cesar Manrique.

