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Hotel de love

It once belonged to the world's most celebrated couple. Now Casa Kimberley, the hideaway where Taylor and Burton fought and loved, is open to new romantics

At the Casa Kimberley bed and breakfast in the seaside town of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, all the mirrors are slimming ones. It somehow seems fitting when you know that the house, and almost everything in it, once belonged to probably the most famous dieter of them all, Liz Taylor. And if mirrors could talk, these could tell us about a lot more than the ever-changing size of Liz Taylor's thighs. For this was the house that Richard Burton bought Taylor as a 32nd birthday present in 1963, at the height of their famous romance.

The two — known by long-time locals simply as *los novios* (the lovers) — first came to Puerto Vallarta in 1963 when Richard Burton was filming Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*, directed by John Huston. Burton and Taylor had just finished shooting *Cleopatra* (where they first met), and although she didn't have a part in Huston's film, Taylor came to Mexico with Burton, some say to keep a jealous eye on his sexy co-stars Ava Gardner, Deborah Kerr and nymphet Sue Lyon.

At the time, both Taylor and Burton

were still technically married to other people — Taylor to Eddie Fisher and Burton to his first wife, Sybil. Taylor had publicly announced to Fisher that she was leaving him. Sybil had attempted suicide. Not to be outdone, so had Taylor. Twentieth Century-Fox had tried to sue for creating bad publicity around the film *Cleopatra*. Paparazzi were everywhere and every day were treated (and in turn treated Sybil and Eddie) to the sight of Taylor, dressed to kill, making visits to the set of *The Night of the Iguana*, each day looking more stunning than the day before. The volatility potential was high and, prepared for the worst, John Huston gave all the cast members a box of bullets engraved with each other's names. But it must have been more fun than anyone expected because Huston ended up buying a house in Puerto Vallarta and the Burtons bought another just across the tiny cobblestoned street, creating an influx of American property-owners that earned the neighbourhood the local nickname "Gringo Gulch".

Back then, the town must have seemed pretty idyllic to the superstars. A million miles from the Hollywood >



scene, it had a population of around 1000, served by just two taxi cabs. But the publicity generated by *The Night of the Iguana* turned the tranquil fishing village into a busy tourist town (current population 300,000) and, judging by how often we were solicited walking down the main street, there must now be about two cabs per person, plus enough shops selling trinkets, rugs,

windows in the sitting room (singing Welsh folk songs to each other), shows a less built-up Puerto Vallarta. But the view today is still beautiful, and indoors things have hardly changed at all. For just \$5 you can see for yourself during a short guided tour of the property. Or you can wallow in the romance and stay in one of the large, if (for the price) slightly dilapidated rooms. The noisy overhead fan might keep you awake (there's no air-conditioning which, off-season, can make it oppressively hot), but then you don't come to the house that once belonged to probably the most romantic couple in the world to sleep.

In 1971 Burton built another house across the street which he called "the dog

milk straight from the carton; bathing in the two-person, human-heart-shaped pink marble bathtub in the rooftop penthouse bedroom suite, which Burton built as a wedding present to Taylor; making sweaty love in the enormous bed; brushing their teeth at the sink; even using the lavatory. Because, at a time when so many Hollywood stars presented a sanitised view of themselves to the world (Rock Hudson and Doris Day spring to mind), Taylor and Burton seemed real. Burton's hair invariably looked like it needed washing. Taylor was often overweight. They drank, smoked, ate, fought, cried, laughed, made up and drank, smoked, ate, fought, cried, laughed and made up all over again — they even divorced and remarried each other. No wonder that even after their final divorce, no matter



Taylor and Burton are mobbed arriving in Mexico for the filming of *The Night of the Iguana*. Right, Casa Kimberley's living area, far from the madding crowd.

glassware and clothes to keep most shopaholics happy for days. For a taste of what life would have been like when the Burtons first moved there you could visit the little village of Sayulita, about 50 kilometres north of Puerto Vallarta. Dirt roads, no shops, deserted beaches, and wild horses and hump-backed cows wandering the back streets unattended.

Casa Kimberley is set in Old Puerto Vallarta, about a 10-minute walk from New Puerto Vallarta with its big hotels, discos, cheap piña coladas and hordes of very drunk American college students on holiday. By contrast, the old part of town, while still touristy, retains a more dignified air with its cobbled streets, steep stair pavements, whitewashed houses with red-tiled roofs, and cheaper shops (don't buy anything without comparing prices in the back streets of this part of town first).

The photo on the previous page, taken by Roddy McDowall for *Life* magazine, of Burton and Taylor standing in front of the enormous french



house" and which is connected to the main property by a pretty Venetian-style "bridge of sighs" where the romantically inclined can get married, later spending their honeymoon night in one of the nine rooms, all named after movies starring the famous pair: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The VIPs*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. There is memorabilia everywhere — much of which Taylor left behind when she sold the house — from magazines, posters, photos and press cuttings to letters, the children's school reports, even bath oil.

Surrounded by all the things they left, you feel as though the couple might come home at any minute, and it is impossible not to envisage them in little domestic scenes: standing at the fridge in the big open-plan kitchen drinking

how many husbands and wives each subsequently had, in the eyes of the world they were made for each other.

Theirs was a romance that could survive any tempest, even divorce and death, and although Burton is long dead and Taylor hasn't been back there in years, to the locals Casa Kimberley will always be the house of *los novios*. ■

Romance for rent

Casa Kimberley is at 445 Calle Zaragoza, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Phone and fax: (52) 322-2-13-36. High season: Nov-May, \$US85 per night (including breakfast) for a basic room, \$US150 per night for the penthouse suite. Low season: June-Oct, \$US65 per night (including breakfast) for a basic room, \$US100 per night for the penthouse suite.