From Málaga to the Costa del Sol: A Family History in El Salvador

The story of a family, a coast and an island, told across five generations.

Prologue

In 1891 Antonio Aguilar de Fernández stepped onto the pier at Puerto de La Libertad with the clothes he wore and a belt of gold coins. He came from Málaga, by way of Chile. Within a generation he had founded El Salvador's first tannery and bought thirty-six kilometres of Pacific shoreline that no one else wanted.

He called it Hacienda Santa Teresa. Today the shore carries the name of the coast he left behind in Málaga: the Costa del Sol.

Four generations later it is one of the best-known shores in the country. Just beyond its eastern tip, between the mouth of the Río Lempa and the open Pacific, lies Isla Tasajera.

This is the history of that land, and of the family whose name and work are bound to it.

I. A title from Málaga, 1693

The family's records trace its line to the Marquesado del Vado, a title granted in Málaga, Andalucía, in 1693 by Carlos II, the last Habsburg king of Spain.

Málaga is one of the oldest ports on the Mediterranean. For nearly eight centuries it was a city of al-Andalus, and the Alcazaba, its Moorish citadel, still stands above the harbour. The family Antonio was born into carried that inheritance: Andalusian, seafaring, at home where cultures and trade routes meet.

It is the reason a coast in Central America bears a Mediterranean name.

II. The crossing, 1891

In 1891 Antonio left Spain for Chile, and from Chile sailed north to El Salvador.

He landed at Puerto de La Libertad with no property, no partners and no letters of introduction. He had the clothes on his back and a belt of gold coins. Everything that follows in this story was built from that belt.

III. La Ibérica: the first fortune

He founded La Ibérica, the first tannery in El Salvador.

Leather-working as a trade was unknown in the country when he arrived. He brought the craft with him, trained the people who practised it and built the family's first wealth from it. In a country then betting almost everything on coffee, he made his fortune from something no one else was making.

The craft itself was an Andalusian inheritance. The leather of Córdoba had been prized across the Mediterranean since the days of al-Andalus, and he carried that tradition to a country that had never known it.

He named the business for the peninsula he came from. In time, the family would do the same with the land.

IV. Thirty-six kilometres of coast

With the profits of the tannery he began buying land along the Pacific, parcel by parcel, until he held an unbroken thirty-six kilometres from the Río Jiboa to the Río Lempa.

By the standards of the time it was poor land. The soil was sandy and thin, fit for watermelon and cattle and little else. Landowners of his generation wanted volcanic highlands for coffee. He wanted the sea.

The land had no name. He gave it one: Hacienda Santa Teresa. He held all thirty-six kilometres until he died, aged 94.

What he saw in that sand took the rest of the country most of a century to see.

V. Reform, war and return

The second generation inherited the coast and then lost part of it. El Salvador's agrarian reform expropriated roughly 1,800 manzanas, about 1,260 hectares, which was the only arable portion of the estate.

What remained was the beachfront. The family turned to it. Residential development came first, and in the 1970s the family built the Tesoro Beach Hotel, opened under the Hyatt international flag.

By then the shore carried the name of the coast Antonio had left in 1891: the Costa del Sol, after his native Málaga.

Two years after it opened, civil war forced it to close. It stayed closed for about four years. In 1983, with the war still being fought, the family reopened it.

The pattern is the family's own: arrive with little, build, lose a part, rebuild on what remains. With the hotel, the family's work also became hospitality: receiving guests on the shore it had named.

VI. The Costa del Sol today

The coast Antonio bought for its sand is now El Salvador's established beach destination, and one of the most active zones for high-rise construction in the country.

Planners reached his conclusion in the 1970s. A study by the consultancy Robert Nathan identified the Costa del Sol as the country's first-priority zone for tourism development, chiefly for its closeness to the capital. The new international airport was then built nearby. It opened on 31 January 1980 and today sits about 42 km from San Salvador by motorway.

The country around it has changed faster still.

- More than 4.1 million international visitors in 2025
- More than 2.9 million international visitors from January to July 2026, up 24% on 2025 and 94% on 2019
- US$2.1 billion in tourism revenue in the first half of 2026, up 10% on 2025
- US$3.6 billion: the government's tourism revenue target for the full year 2026

VII. Isla Tasajera

Isla Tasajera lies 300 metres east of the tip of the Costa del Sol peninsula, where the Jaltepeque estuary meets the Pacific.

It can be reached from the open sea by two channels: the Bocana del Cordoncillo to the west and the mouth of the Río Lempa, El Salvador's great river, to the east. On one side is the ocean. On the other are sheltered mangrove waterways, navigable by yacht tender, kayak or launch.

The island sits inside the Jaltepeque Complex, 49,454 hectares of estuary, mangrove forest, lagoon and beach, designated a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. Sea turtles nest on its beaches, among them the green turtle and the leatherback. Sixty-four species of migratory waterbird have been recorded resting in its mangroves.

It is close to everything and feels far from all of it. The towers of the Costa del Sol are in sight across the channel. The island itself is fishing boats, cashew trees and tide.

VIII. The line of descent

The family descends from Antonio Aguilar de Fernández through his only child, Aida, and takes its name from her marriage.

Antonio married Amelia Melara Castillo. Their daughter Aida Aguilar, born in El Salvador in 1906, married José Closa Ginesta of Barcelona, son of Antonio Closa and Carmen Ginesta. They had two children, Antonio and Vilma. Through that marriage a house founded by a man from Málaga took a Catalan name, and joined two coasts of Spain in one Salvadoran family.

First generation. Antonio Aguilar de Fernández. Born in Málaga, Andalucía. Died aged 94. Married Amelia Melara Castillo (died 1941).

Second generation. Aida Aguilar. Born in El Salvador, 1906. Died 1964. Married José Closa Ginesta of Barcelona (1899–1961).

Third generation. Antonio Closa Aguilar. Born in El Salvador, 1936. Died in San Salvador, 2025. Heir to the family's lands. Married Berta Marina Salazar.

Fourth generation. Eduardo Antonio, Javier and Beatriz Closa. The three children of Antonio and Berta Marina, born in El Salvador.

Fifth generation. Their nine children. Three to each branch of the family, born in El Salvador.

IX. What five generations have kept

Much has changed on this coast since 1891. A few things in the family have not.

A name. A lineage that began in Málaga in 1693 crossed an ocean and gave its home coast's name to a new one. The family has carried it in El Salvador for more than 130 years.

Work. The first fortune came from a craft, brought from Andalucía and taught to others. Nothing in this story was inherited before it was built.

Patience. Antonio bought the land others overlooked and kept it whole for a lifetime. He did not live to see the coast become what he believed it would.

Constancy. Reform took the fields and war closed the doors. The family stayed, and reopened them.

Hospitality. For half a century the family has received guests on this shore.

Care for the land. The island and its estuary remain a refuge for sea turtles, migratory birds and the families who fish its waters.

This history is set down so that those who come to know this place may also know the people who have belonged to it.

X. Timeline

1693. Title of Marqués del Vado granted by Carlos II in Málaga.

1891. Antonio Aguilar de Fernández leaves Spain for Chile, then El Salvador, and lands at Puerto de La Libertad.

After 1891. He founds La Ibérica, El Salvador's first tannery, and begins buying coastal land.

Around the 1900s. He holds 36 km of coast from the Río Jiboa to the Río Lempa, which he names Hacienda Santa Teresa.

1970s. The coast is identified as the country's priority tourism zone. The family builds the Tesoro Beach Hotel under the Hyatt flag, and Antonio Closa gives twenty manzanas for the Turicentro Costa del Sol.

1980. Agrarian reform expropriates about 1,800 manzanas of arable land.

1980. The international airport opens nearby. The hotel stands closed by civil war, about four years in all.

1983. The Tesoro Beach Hotel reopens.

2011. The Jaltepeque Complex, including Isla Tasajera, is designated a Ramsar wetland.

2026. Four generations on, the family sets down its history.

Sources

The family history is told from the family's own account and records. Visitor and revenue figures: El Salvador's Ministry of Tourism, as reported by El Salvador in English, 23 March and 25 August 2026. Isla Tasajera and the Jaltepeque Complex: the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Airport opening date: public record.