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IN THE
MOMENT

MICHELLE WILLIAMS





BEFORE SUNSET
A view from
Bunkhouse Group's
new Hotel San
Cristóbal in Todos
Santos, Mexico.

HOT PROPERTY

THE PATRON'S SAINT

With the opening of her first international property this month, hotelier Liz Lambert, who has made a name for herself in Texas, is exploring new frontiers.

BY LAURA NEILSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIA RIVEROLA

I DON'T KNOW THAT I had the right personality to run a small shop and just be the day person there," says Liz Lambert, the 53-year-old Austin, Texas-based hotelier. "There was too much interesting stuff to do."

Had Lambert resigned herself to running a one-hotel operation, she'd have only Austin's Hotel San José to her name. She purchased the dodgy, \$30-per-night motor lodge in 1995 and later converted it into the 40-room, Southwestern minimalist bastion of cool it is today. San José's opening in 2000 heralded—and quite possibly facilitated—a turnaround in Austin's local economy, especially in the area of South Congress.

Since then, Lambert has opened a handful of other Texas establishments. With Bunkhouse Group, the company she founded in 2006, Lambert's portfolio now includes Hotel Saint Cecilia in Austin, El Cosmico in Marfa, Hotel Havana in San Antonio and Jo's Coffee shops—Bunkhouse's only non-hotel enterprise—also in Austin. This month, Bunkhouse expands internationally with the Hotel San Cristóbal on Mexico's Baja Peninsula. The property is the company's fifth hotel (and its first outside of Texas).

Over the past two decades, Lambert has become one of the most influential hoteliers in the industry. Her personal aesthetic—a mix of industrial minimalism, Texan traditionalism and bohemian rocker-chic—has given rise to a new breed of American boutique hotels. "When you're really curating and cultivating a world around a hotel, you get a much more culturally rich and textured approach to it, where it truly >

feels like someone's home," says J.Crew's president and creative director, Jenna Lyons, a close friend of Lambert's. "And I think that's something that's really hard to do, but I don't feel like she's trying. I don't think she can do it any other way."

As Austin has become a more popular travel destination, the Hotel San José maintains its status as one of the city's most sought-after establishments. And yet, outside of Texas and the hospitality industry, Lambert, a former lawyer who was once a prosecutor for the Manhattan district attorney's office, remains relatively unknown.

Conceptually and aesthetically, no two Bunkhouse properties are alike. The Hotel Saint Cecilia, which opened in 2008, is an intimate, 14-room hideaway built around an 1880s Victorian home in the Travis Heights neighborhood, not far from the Hotel San José. Given its secluded setting, the tree-shaded property has attracted its share of high-profile guests. In fall 2015, the Foo Fighters stayed there to record their five-track EP, aptly named *Saint Cecilia*.

El Cosmico, in Marfa, which opened a year later, is a wilder concept; it comprises a series of vintage trailers, tepees and tents on the property's 21 acres. "She has a great knack for creating a space that relates to the location," Lyons says shortly

before heading from New York down to Marfa for El Cosmico's annual Trans-Pecos Festival of Music + Love. The colorful three-day event in the West Texas desert features vendors and musical acts that have included Neko Case, Ben Kweller, M. Ward, Patty Griffin and Robert Plant.

Even as Bunkhouse's portfolio grows, Lambert's hands-on role in the design process hasn't changed.

"SHE HAS A GREAT KNACK FOR CREATING A SPACE THAT RELATES TO THE LOCATION."

—JENNA LYONS

The rooms are tapestries of locally made furnishings and eclectic treasures found on her travels, each infused with a touch of rock 'n' roll.

"It actually just comes from stuff she likes, so really it's an extension of her," says Amar Lalvani, CEO and managing partner at Standard International, who met and befriended Lambert while visiting Austin about five years ago.

Lalvani and Lambert started out as friends who bonded over their shared industry and interests; today they're colleagues. In 2015, Standard International invested a 51 percent stake in Bunkhouse Group (an increase from an earlier investment of 20 percent).

The acquisition installed Lalvani as Bunkhouse's new CEO, while Lambert remains chief creative officer. "We'd had a number of other situations where people were interested in investing or partnering, but none of them were really right until Standard," Lambert says. "Culturally, we're a great fit. Standard can continue to grow in these gateway cities and do big hotels that have a certain personality, and we're going to do different, more quirky things in different markets."

The latest to open is the 32-room Hotel San Cristóbal, which is part of Tres Santos, a new community that Chip Conley, Airbnb's head of global hospitality and strategy, first brought to Lambert's attention.

The airy, '70s-feeling beachfront haven, situated 50 miles north of Cabo San Lucas in the small fishing town of Todos Santos, offers guests the anti-Cabo experience: a place to surf and slow down in a setting featuring furnishings crafted in Guadalajara, vibrant Guatemalan fabrics and local design elements such as stamped concrete tiles.

The Hotel San Cristóbal is new territory for Lambert and her company, but they've incorporated familiar concepts. Besides offering employment for Todos Santos residents, Bunkhouse sought connections with the town's community separate from the hotel. (The company already applies this strategy



THE LIFE AQUATIC
Above: The pool area of Hotel San Cristóbal, which overlooks Playa Punta Lobos.

TRUE GRIT
Below: Liz Lambert, the Austin-based hotelier who will open her first property outside of Texas this month, on her motorbike in Mexico.



IN LIVING COLOR
Above: One of Hotel San Cristóbal's 32 guest rooms, featuring locally made furnishings and Guatemalan fabrics.

in Austin, making concert series, workshops and holiday parties at the Hotel San José open to the public.) In the fall of 2015, the company contributed to travel expenses for a game between the Austin baseball club the Texas Playboys and a local Todos Santos team in the town's stadium, which both American groups—Bunkhouse and the Playboys—had repainted the day before.

Lambert's ties to Texas run deep. She grew up in West Texas in Odessa, with three older brothers, in a family that was in the ranching business. She credits her mother, who loved to travel, and her grandfather, a rancher who brought her along to business meetings at grand old hotels, for instilling an early love of the hospitality world. After graduating with a law degree from the University of Texas, Lambert moved to New York in the early '90s, where she worked in Manhattan's district attorney's office for several years. A job with the Texas attorney general and personal matters eventually called her back to Austin, marking a dark chapter in her life. AIDS and HIV eventually claimed the lives of several close friends as well as her brother Lyndon (another brother, Blake, died of heart failure four months later).

Lambert suddenly perceived risk and fear of failure differently. "I knew that no matter what happened, I wasn't going to be buried in debt for the rest of my life," she says of her impulsive decision to purchase her first hotel, the Motel San José, a decaying

property across the street from Austin's hallowed music venue the Continental Club.

At first Lambert ran the motel as it was, intending to convert one room at a time. She quickly realized that one or two decent, higher-priced rooms wouldn't be enough to attract a more ideal clientele to the motel as a whole. After three years, she finally secured financing and enlisted the Austin architecture firm Lake Flato to create plans for the 14-month transformation.

If any Austin-based company embraces the city's famous "Keep Austin Weird" slogan, it's Lambert's. The sign outside its headquarters on East Cesar Chavez Street, which reads *Bunkhouse "Corporate" Offices*, flaunts its disregard for typical big-company culture, while its core values, which are distributed on large, thick-stock cards, include directives such as "Be Real," "Embrace Adventure" and "Create Magic."

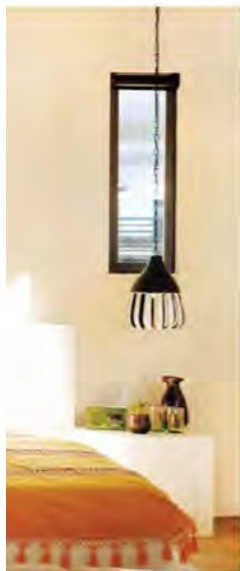
Outside-the-box thinking courses through the company's veins as well. "I wouldn't be doing marketing for another hotel group," says the director of marketing and communications, Isadora McKeon, who started at Bunkhouse almost a decade ago as Lambert's assistant. Like Lambert, most employees don't come from hotel backgrounds, which makes for less adherence to standard-issue industry practices.

"I think there's definitely a sense of family in how she combines people, and that it has a lot to do with alchemy, fun and collaboration," says Carrie

Brownstein, who met Lambert in 2012 while writing her memoir, *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, in Austin. The musician, writer and actress had inquired about a long-term stay at the Hotel Saint Cecilia; Lambert offered up her guesthouse instead. Brownstein, now a close friend, officiated at Lambert's wedding to makeup artist Erin Lee Smith in 2015.

Today Bunkhouse counts 300 employees. Sitting at the kitchen table of her home in Travis Heights, Lambert points toward her living room: "We used to have the company Christmas party here," she says. "We could never do that now." Even more employees are likely to join the team to help manage several upcoming Austin-based projects, including the ambitious, 89-room Hotel Magdalena. The Lake Flato-designed structure, a series of five multitiered buildings inspired by Texan vacationers' lake houses, is scheduled to open in 2018. And Bunkhouse recently took over management of the Austin Motel, located next to the Hotel San José. Its 41 rooms will be fully renovated by March.

Looking ahead, Lambert talks of opening hotels in more markets (cities such as Nashville or New Orleans, perhaps), expanding El Cosmico and potentially launching a budget-friendly, limited-service brand of hotels, all of which makes that idea of a single-hotel operation seem even more distant. "I think that's part of the fun of it—to keep moving," Lambert says. ●



FOOD FOR THOUGHT
Below: Fish and shrimp tacos and a michelada from El Parguito, a nearby taquería in Todos Santos.



STEP AHEAD
Left: A stairway to the Hotel San Cristóbal's pool and yoga deck. Above: Nevería La Paloma, a local, family-run ice cream store.