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Sleek new hotel rises in West Texas outpost of Marfa

TRAVEL

By Pam LeBlanc, American-Statesman Staff Saturday, April 2, 2016



The Hotel Saint George opened in March in Marfa.

CASEY DUNN

Ranchers and railroad travelers with business in the dusty West Texas town of Marfa in the late 1800s stayed at the grand-for-the-time Hotel Saint George.

The original two-story hotel closed in 1929, but a new incarnation — in the form of a gleaming, white, four-story box — has risen in its footprint.

The 2016 version might leave some old cowboys scratching their heads. But the sleek hotel, with 55 guest rooms, a fine-dining restaurant and a bar, plus an adjacent event space and swimming pool, reflects the once-sleepy town's heritage as it looks to the future, according to owner Tim Crowley.

Highlights

- The original two-story Hotel Saint George closed in 1929.
 - The new incarnation of Hotel Saint George stands four stories tall.
 - Tim Crowley, a plaintiff's attorney who moved to Marfa from Houston in the 1990s, owns the hotel.
 - The hotel features pieces by artists with ties to Marfa.
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CASEY DUNN

The rooms at the Hotel Saint George in Marfa are sleek and modern.

He points to the local materials used in its construction, and the building's white and gray color palette, which fits right in on Highland Avenue, the main strip in Marfa. Step into the lobby and you'll see exposed beams, original concrete floors, salvaged brick walls, reclaimed marble surfaces and steel doors and counter tops.

"These are real Marfa materials," says Crowley, 61, a successful former plaintiff's attorney from Houston who moved to Marfa more than 20 years ago.

Crowley's a familiar face here. Along with entrepreneurs like Liz Lambert of Austin, he ushered in the second era of development in Marfa in the 1990s, after the resurgence of artist Donald Judd in the 1970s. He opened the nonprofit Crowley Theater and the Marfa Book Co., got involved in the Chinati Foundation and Marfa Public Radio, and helped mold the contemporary art and cultural community of Marfa as it's known today.

Now Crowley, who has served as assistant district attorney since 2013, is making over at least one part of Marfa once again. Houston-based architecture firm Carlos Jimenez Studio designed the new Saint George, which took a year and a half to complete.

"The show's all inside," says Mercer Black, the hotel's director of communication, as she steps into the city's only working elevator for a tour.

Artwork by Christopher Wool, Mark Flood, Jeff Elrod and other artists with Marfa ties hangs on the walls. Guest rooms are decorated with distressed leather, soft-lustered steel elements, sheepskin rugs and stark white bedding. Chef Allison Jenkins, formerly of the now-defunct LaV in Austin and Little Nell in Aspen, wields pots and pans at LaVenture, the in-house restaurant, which serves rustic American-style cuisine with French and Italian influences. And the Marfa Bookstore, displaced during construction, occupies a generous slice of the ground floor, where it hosts author readings and community events.

Most importantly, Crowley says, the hotel provides much needed lodging in a town that had to turn away visitors who couldn't get reservations at any of the 100 or so hotel rooms that existed before it opened.

"Marfa is a world-class cultural destination. You have the Chinati Foundation, the Judd Foundation, Ballroom Marfa, Marfa Contemporary, Marfa Studio of Arts and another half dozen visual arts galleries," Crowley says. "There's a writer residency program, two film festivals, two music festivals, public radio, a theater and tons of pop-up events. You cannot name another small town in America that has the amount or quality of cultural activities that Marfa has. So the town does need the hotel rooms, and I thought it would be a fun project to do something a step above the Hampton Inn and La Quinta that normally get developed."



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The lobby of the new Hotel Saint George in Marfa includes a seating area and book store; a customer browses in the lobby bookstore of the Hotel Saint George.

As for those who turn up their nose at the hotel's modern style?

"In a small town, particularly in a small town or among art people, there will always be those people who will say, 'It's OK, but I'd have made it pink if it were up to me,'" Crowley says.

He says the hotel has received "an overwhelmingly positive reaction" from long-time area residents. "They're just thrilled to see the town continue to have some prosperity, because the 1950s to the 1990s were a really rough time for Marfa," he says.

Crowley says he's not planning any more renovation projects, at least for the time being, in Marfa.

"The goal was to do something that was uniquely Marfa. When you walk into the lobby and the rooms, it's not like you're walking into one of these places that call themselves a hip hotel. You cannot go into this hotel and say, 'I saw something similar when I was in Miami or New York.'"

And for that, those old-time cowboys are surely grateful.



CASEY DUNN

IF YOU GO

The Hotel Saint George is located at 105 S. Highland Ave. in Marfa. Rates start at \$165 per night in the low season and \$195 per night in the high season. For more information, go to marfasaintgeorge.com.