



**sunshine state** TRAVEL SUMMER 2

Alentejo,

# LIZ LAMBERT *The oft-imitated Texas innkeeper can do*

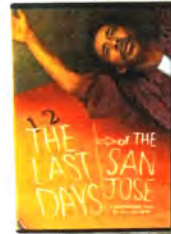


## ROUGH RIDER

Who could have seen anything like a future in that drug-glutted roach motel, the San José? It was 1995, and Liz Lambert — a lawyer, back home in Texas after a stint as a New York City prosecutor — stumbled out of Austin's famous rock hall the Continental Club, crossed South Congress Avenue and faced her destiny. "The place looked empty, but it wasn't," Lambert says about her first hotel. "It's just everyone who stayed there didn't have cars or luggage, or come out much during the days." Lambert took over the squalid spot with plans to renovate it one room at a time. For that, she needed a loan; every bank balked. "They said, 'You can't make one room nice, charge \$75 and have a hooker next door turning tricks all night.'" So Lambert worked the front desk for nearly three years, renting rooms for \$30 behind a plate-glass window. She befriended the drug addicts, street musicians and prostitutes who called the place home, and made a documentary about them. Finally, she got financing. "We stripped the place down," she says. "Down to the studs."



AN INNKEEPER'S TWIST ON CINEMA VERITÉ.



FAR RIGHT: THE ORIGINAL (READ: DUMPY) SAN JOSÉ BEFORE LAMBERT RENOVATED WITH BRIGHT FURNISHINGS, VINTAGE MUSIC POSTERS AND COWHIDE RUGS, AS SEEN AT NEAR LEFT.

THE HOTEL SAN JOSÉ IN ITS CURRENT, IVY-ENCASED GLORY.



BELOW: HER PROSECUTOR DAYS IN NEW YORK. IN 1994 WITH DISTRICT ATTORNEY ROBERT MORGENTHAU. LEFT: FAMILY SNAPSOTS FROM HER YOUTH IN ODESSA, TEX.



ABOVE: THE SAN JOSÉ'S FUNKY COFFEE SHACK, JO'S. RIGHT: RED WING MOTORCYCLE BOOTS, A WARDROBE STAPLE.



THE BUNGALOW SHE BOUGHT FOR ONLY \$1, HAULED ACROSS AUSTIN AND GUT-RENOVATED.



THE CONTINENTAL CLUB, A SOUTH CONGRESS AVENUE INSTITUTION. LEFT: THE AVENUE CIRCA 1900. "THERE USED TO BE TOURIST COURTS LIKE THE SAN JOSÉ DOTTED UP AND DOWN SOUTH CONGRESS," LAMBERT SAYS. "BASICALLY ALL THE WAY TO SAN ANTONIO."





RIGHT AND BELOW: AUSTIN'S SAINT CECILIA CHANNELS THE "GLAM BUT DECADENT" FEEL OF "EXILE ON MAIN STREET"—ERA ROCK MUSIC.



## WESTWARD EXPANSION

With the renovated San José — cedar gates, longleaf pine furnishings, a pool out of "The Graduate" — Lambert created a winning concept, but she wasn't content to just duplicate it. After turning the San José into a bungalow paradise in 2000, she dreamed up the Hotel Saint Cecilia as an "Exile on Main Street"-inspired paean to rock 'n' roll, with vintage turntables in each room. Then came El Cosmico, a campground in Marfa dotted with teepees, yurts and vintage R.V.'s. "Marfa's full of artists, writers and freaks," she says. "I'm in that third category." Her latest project, which opened in April, is the Hotel Havana, a plantation-style classic in San Antonio that had "too many slipcovers, too much floral this-and-that." Now blood-red patent leather fills the elegant parlors, and Smeg minibar refrigerators are stocked with fresh salsas and bottled local rainwater. "It sounds kind of hokey," Lambert says of her varied hotel concepts, "but I try to listen to the properties."



LEFT: AMONG THE OFFERINGS AT THE SAINT CECILIA'S LIBRARY. RIGHT: A HOTEL ASHTRAY.



THE FACADE OF THE HAVANA, WHICH DATES FROM 1914. BELOW: A BOTTLE OF RICHARD'S RAINWATER FROM THE MINIBAR.



LEFT: AMONG THE OFFERINGS AT THE SAINT CECILIA'S LIBRARY. RIGHT: A HOTEL ASHTRAY.



CUBA'S MIDCENTURY VITALITY, ENBALMED BY THE REVOLUTION, IS EVOKED IN THE NEW HAVANA IN SAN ANTONIO.



LAMBERT LOVES BUTCH ANTHONY'S RECYCLED CANVAS PAINTINGS (ABOVE) AND NINA GARDUNO'S FREECITY DESIGNS.



INSIDE A VINTAGE R.V. IN EL COSMICO IN MARFA. ABOVE RIGHT: A POSTER FOR THE 2009 TRANS-PECOS FESTIVAL.



AN EL COSMICO TEEPEE. LEFT: A CLASSIC R.V. LOGO.



## TEXAS TWO-STEP

When she first landed in Austin, Lambert bought the bungalow she still lives in for \$1. Covered in graffiti, it looked like a bombed-out Hooverville shanty and also happened to be in the wrong neighborhood. "It's such an odd notion for a New Yorker, but down here people are always carting houses around," she says. So she had the home hauled to the artier Travis Heights area, where she revamped it with a cowgirl-glam feel. Lambert's girlfriend is the folk singer Amy Cook, and the two split their time between the bungalow and "the Bunkhouse," their ranch in the Davis Mountains foothills. Her whole Hill Country-chic shtick has been copied by other hoteliers, but Lambert says a hotel's personality can't be faked. "When we started, at the San José, it was all concrete floors, hippie blankets, antiques," she says. "I didn't know if people were going to get it." Shortly after it reopened, a drug addict tried to check in, too strung out to realize the place had been redone until he reached the front desk. "Oh, my God," he said. "It's a miracle!"



ABOVE AND BELOW: "THE BUNKHOUSE," HER RANCH IN THE DAVIS MOUNTAIN FOOTHILLS.



THE LATEST ALBUM FROM LAMBERT'S GIRLFRIEND, AMY COOK. BELOW: THE ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE, A FAVORITE THEATER IN AUSTIN.



PORTRAIT, HOTEL SAN JOSÉ, HOTEL HAVANA AND HOTEL SAINT CECILIA: ALLISON V. SMITH; DVD AND "EXILE ON MAIN STREET": CO: DAN NEVILLE/THE NEW YORK TIMES; CONGRESS AVENUE: AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER; AUSTIN PUBLIC LIBRARY: BOOT: FROM RED WING; CONTINENTAL CLUB: JEREMY GREEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; WATER BOTTLE: WYATT McSPADDEN; BUTCH ANTHONY ARTWORK: GAS DESIGN CENTER; EL COSMICO: ERIC RYAN ANDERSON (3); SWEATSHIRT: FROM FREECITY; BUNKHOUSE: VINCENT LEROUX/SIC/GMA IMAGES (2); THEATER: FROM ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE; ALL OTHER IMAGES FROM LIZ LAMBERT.