

# George and Marfa



**A marriage of high-design and cowboy culture is emblematic of a hotel's location in an artistic Texas town.**

BY LAURA ITZKOWITZ

The soft Australian sheepskin rugs in the rooms at Marfa's just-opened Hotel Saint George are the perfect welcome after a day of trekking through the grounds of the Chinati Foundation, Donald Judd's contemporary art museum. It's just one of the stops on my mission to capture some of the magic that swirls through this mythical desert settlement, the kind that entices a stylish boutique property to open in a remote locale with a meager population of 2,000 people. Part of Marfa's appeal is also its most unpleasant attribute: It's arduous to get to, and that filters the visitors who come here.

The 10-hour journey from New York is draining, though the three-hour drive

through the Chihuahuan Desert softens the burden. The wide-open landscape and endless expanse of sky attracted Judd to the area in the 1970s; they remain major draws today. So does one of the unlikely culture scenes anywhere in the world. "Judd really filled up the town, and when he died, it allowed other people to think, 'What could I do in Marfa?'" says Joey Benton, founder of the design and fabrication studio Silla, one of the makers involved with the project.

After studying sculpture, Benton moved to town in 1994 to document Judd's estate, and ended up staying. He's behind many of the hotel's custom pieces, including a mahogany-and-steel reception desk.









white cylinder hanging lamps, and wet bars in the 55 charcoal-hued rooms.

Owner Tim Crowley arrived about two and a half years after Benton. More than two decades later, the duo has teamed with Houston architect Carlos Jiménez to restore the original grand hotel, built in the 1880s on the same site. They kept the walls low in the social spaces and exposed some architectural elements, including the beams and columns, but Jiménez says it's by no means a preservation project. "It's more an inheritance, but you also have the freedom to manipulate it and make it more congruent with contemporary needs." For that, they brought in Dallas-based HKS Hospitality to help with the clean-lined interiors.

While it's easy to draw parallels between Judd's minimalist art and the hotel's striking chalk-white boxy facade, the connection between Marfa, Judd, and Saint George is more complex. "There was a conscious decision not to make this some type of Judd land," Crowley tells me over dinner at LaVenture, the hotel's brick-strewn American restaurant that is lined with paintings by Marfa artists, including Christopher Wool and Jeff Elrod. "We wanted to emphasize the architectural elements without adopting the Judd aesthetic because you might be able to do that in New York, but you can't do it here where the real stuff is."

The outcome is a tasteful—and accessible—design with classic armchairs by Alvar Aalto, Benton's century-old black marble bar in the lobby, and handcrafted furniture in the rooms. The renowned Marfa Book Company, which occupies part of the lobby, is where a curated selection of Mykita sunglasses and products by homegrown Marfa Brand Soap share real estate with site-specific exhibitions and performance art shows.

In addition to his foundation, Judd's legacy will always be laced with the ideals he espoused: that art lies in the relationship between an object and its environment. In that sense, Hotel Saint George embodies the spirit of Marfa itself.



(THIS PAGE, FROM TOP) A bedroom at the hotel. A bathroom interior. The LaVenture dining room. (PREVIOUS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) Lobby seating at Hotel Saint George in Marfa, Texas. The hotel exterior. Marfa Book Co., located inside the hotel's lobby.