

Cover Story

Capital Gains

Ambitious sky-scraping hotels are on the move in Austin, but boutique hotels still shine

By Jody Schmal

It's no secret that Austin, the city formerly known as a town, is big business these days. Besides hosting South by Southwest, Formula 1 and the Austin City Limits music festival, the city has a thriving economy, along with a fast-growing population and tourism industry that boasts some 20 million visitors annually.

To keep up, the city's hotel scene is booming, too, and it's poised to reach fever pitch next year with several large-scale projects in the works. In 2015, Kimpton Hotels will debut the 16-story **Hotel Van Zandt** in the historic Rainey Street District; a 160-room **Hotel ZaZa** will grace West Fourth Street; **J.W. Marriott** will build a 1,012-room, 34-story convention hotel on East 2nd Street; and the 326-room **Westin Austin Downtown** will be completed. A 50-story **Fairmont Hotel** is expected to bow at Red River and East Cesar Chavez streets in 2016.

In Austin's pre-skyscraper days, however, smaller stay-over spots evocative of the city's quirkier, homespun past — such as the 76-year-old **Austin Motel**, located along the hip strip South Congress Avenue — were forebears of this boutique hotel bonanza.

Here are five of the trendiest boutique hotels in the "Live Music Capital of the World."

Heywood Hotel

In burgeoning East Austin, where restaurants and bars sprout like wildflowers, lives this seven-room hotel built out from a two-bedroom, one-bath '20s Craftsman bungalow.

Open just two years, Kathy Setzer and George Reynolds' Heywood is a study in small-batch hospitality, with a fine eye for design. From the street it still looks like a house, right down to the homey porch with hanging-basket chairs. Inside, the space opens to a soaring 30-foot lobby with original wood floors and Mid-century modern furniture. Upstairs the rooms in the added-on portion of the hotel spread out across a communal deck, and king patio rooms come with their own mini-porch. You also will encounter a mixture of textures with punches of color, perhaps in the form of a two-tone velvet chair or graphic wallpaper. It all feels cleanly chic, as does the spacious, sky-lit bathroom with a deep tub.

Free parking, free bicycles and free WiFi add to the smart, locavore ethos of the place, as does artwork by local artists and bespoke furniture. In fact, the same craft philosophy that people are putting into cocktails and food, said co-owner Setzer, is what she hopes resonates in the hotel. "A real neighborhood place that feels warm and genuine," she said. "An extension of your experience in the city."

Added bonus: Some of the hottest restaurants in the city are within walking distance, including Qui by "Top Chef" winner and Uchi alum Paul Qui, and Italian newbie Bufalina. The owners and Heywood staff are happy to make their own informed recommendations on where to go to maximize an authentic Austin experience.

» **Vitals:** Rates from \$179 per night. 1609 E. Cesar Chavez, 512-271-5522, heywoodhotel.com.

Hotel Ella

In September, the former Mansion at Judges Hill downtown reopened as Hotel Ella. It also debuted an updated look.

Working with architect Michael Hsu (who designed Uchi in Houston, among other high-profile hospitality projects), Hotel Ella utilizes its rich history — built in 1898, the Greek Revival-style mansion was once owned by Ella and Goodall Wooten — to glamorous aplomb. The column-rich veranda out front beckons even on a cool night, as does the lobby with its crown moulding and perky seating areas.

The original three-story historic mansion portion of the hotel has nine rooms, all uniquely sized with Carrara marble-clad bathrooms, large wardrobes and stately furnishings, such as a mustard-yellow, tufted velvet settee. It also holds the hotel's buzzed-about Goodall's restaurant on the ground floor, as well as a Deco-feeling, navy-hued bar with craft cocktails. (Try the dangerously easy-to-drink West Campus Mule made with ginger beer and Deep Eddy vodka.)

Behind the main building is an annex with 38 rooms, all wrapped around the pool and pebbled sculpture garden starring artwork from Austin's Umlauf family. (Can't miss the life-sized sculpture of a naked Farrah Fawcett.) The hotel is a popular event space, especially for weddings, capable of hosting parties of more than 200 people.

Hotel Ella's owners — a group of more than a dozen investors, some from Houston — also broke ground on a second property on South Congress Avenue. Hotel SoCo, according to manager Nik Fioretti, will have a hipster vibe, per its location, and have about 90 rooms with several restaurants and bars. It is expected to debut around fall 2015.

» **Vitals:** Rates from \$199 per night. 1900 Rio Grande, 512-495-1800, hotellella.com.



Casey Dunn

A king patio room at the Heywood Hotel in East Austin features modern furniture, artfully elegant details as well as its own private patio nook. The hotel also offers free Wi-Fi and bicycles for guests to use.



Casey Dunn

Lodging at the Heywood Hotel boast Mid-century modern furniture and pops of color in wallpaper and décor.



Hotel Ella

The historic Greek Revival-style main structure of the newly renovated and reopened 47-room Hotel Ella strikes a stately pose.



Lone Star Court

Designed by Houston-based Lauren Rottet, motor-court-inspired Lone Star Court in the Domain has Hill Country touches.

Lone Star Court

The newest of this bunch, Lone Star Court is an upscale, modern spin on the old-school motor court concept. Owned by Valencia Group, whose portfolio includes Houston's Hotel Sorella and Hotel Valencia in San Antonio, and designed by Houston-based Lauren Rottet of Rottet Studio, it opened December 24 in the Domain shopping district in northwest Austin.

There are 123 rooms total, mostly crisply decorated standard kings. Retro touches include fully stocked Smeg refrigerators, vintage-inspired furniture and a sliding barnyard door separating the bathroom and bedroom. Outside, the rooms span several floors and wood-rich, lodge-like buildings, with orange rocking chairs in front of each. Most look out to the large, central courtyard, outfitted with firepits and a lagoon-style pool, as well as a covered area where you might catch a live band performing.

The hotel's full-service bar and restaurant, the Watering Trough, helmed by chef Paul Nelson, is a soaring, wood-wrapped space with a cozy fireplace, craft beer and cocktails and Texas-inspired dishes (think bean-free chili and spicy shoestring fries) plus communal bench seating that opens via garage doors to the pool area. It's open late. The Feed Store, an on-site food truck, dishes out quick plates such as breakfast tacos and Frito pie all day.

» **Vitals:** Rates from \$149 per night. 10901 Domain Drive, 512-836-3030, lonestarcourt.com.



Lone Star Court

Retro-feeling furnishings grace the rooms at Lone Star Court, which opened in December.