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COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 22

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FROM
SCRATCH

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relying on?

The
NOMAD
economy



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From yes please to

NO
thanks

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GIMME SHELTER

California hospitality brand Shelter Social Club is preserving nostalgic roadside motels and infusing them with modern soul.

WORDS SERENA RENNER



Chris Sewell lived in an idyllic Californian town that seemingly had everything. To many, it was utopia in the form of a Mediterranean-style riviera sandwiched between mountains and the sea. But to him, there was one important quality missing – the boundless creative energy that often comes with a high concentration of young professionals.

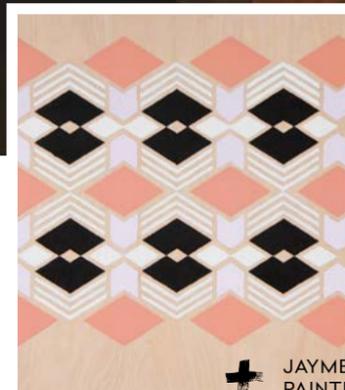
While all his late-twenties friends were moving to bigger cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and New York, Chris and his partner Kenny Osehan decided to stick around and see if they could help stimulate whatever spirit they felt their Santa Barbara home was lacking.

“You’ve got your 20-year-old kid who comes to Santa Barbara to go to the university,” says Chris. “Then they move elsewhere to get a job. Maybe they come back to Santa Barbara once they’re in their 40s. But the creatives, who tend to be in their late 20s to early 40s – the people who are ready to hustle and do something unique while also having the vision and energy to execute things – aren’t around. We wanted to help make the town more of a place that we would like to experience [ourselves].”

The result was Shelter Social Club, an umbrella company with four motels that has since added restaurants and clubs to its fold. And whether due to coincidence or correlation, 10 years later Santa Barbara is home to specialty coffee roasters, food trucks, modern art galleries, an urban wine trail and a district fittingly called the “Funk Zone”. >

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMO MOTEL – AUDREY MA





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These cultural icons are also spreading to surrounding country towns such as Los Alamos, where I meet Chris in the parking lot of his newest hospitality venture, the Alamo Motel. He's wearing a sporty ensemble of black and charcoal clothing, high-top sneakers and a beige military cap concealing a head of red hair. His rusty beard, freckle-ringed eyes and frank manner of speaking remind me of an old friend.

As an indie rock soundtrack shifts between Feist, Bon Iver and Radiohead, we meet at the grassy communal area complete with fire pit, string lights and two wooden rocking chairs.

"I didn't buy the motel; I bought the neon sign," laughs Chris.

Only three guest rooms have completed the transformation from their Christmas-bedding, popcorn-ceiling, box-television baseline to their modern state of raw woods, white linens, brass fixtures, hide rugs, rivet-studded leathers and animal artwork. Chris and Kenny would like the renovation to move faster. But it all depends on funds.

"There's a lot of interest in what we're doing, but to find those like-minded financial people is tricky. I don't want to jump in bed with just anyone; I want it to be someone who recognises our brand and sees the potential in its expansion without trying to control everything. We need financial enablers who let us do our thing," says Chris.

Their thing started when Chris and Kenny were in their late twenties, looking for a way to bolster the local arts community and conjure the kind of culture that dwelled only in their dreams. Kenny's family worked in the Santa Barbara hospitality industry, and the couple began toying with the idea of running a small hotel.

"We started discussing the idea with [Kenny's] family," says Chris. "And the next thing we knew a family friend approached them and was like, 'Hey, we got this little motel on the main street in Santa Barbara. Would you guys be interested in doing operations?' Despite not knowing what the hell we were doing, Kenny and I realised this was a chance to test out our vision."



PHOTOGRAPHY: PROFILE IMAGE - NANCY NEIL PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMO MOTEL - AUDREY MA



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So the hoteliers-in-training signed a three-year lease on the Presidio Motel, a classic motor lodge usually shot in horror films and US TV dramas, which mostly caters to truckers, farm workers and long-distance road-trippers looking for a late-night pillow.

"These places have this nostalgic quality that I wanted to preserve, maybe because they feel like part of my childhood," says Chris, who as a teen would skateboard in the car park of a similar motel in St Petersburg, Florida.

The Presidio was inhabited by drug addicts and squatters when Chris and Kenny moved in. They didn't have the funds to renovate and rebrand right away, so they ran it as it was and spent three years slowly attracting a

closeted community of artists and musicians. The pair increased occupancy – and the average room rate – and finally had enough money to bring in two artists from the University of California, Santa Barbara, to install whimsical wall pieces for each of the 16 rooms.

Soon the motel was offering complimentary beach cruisers, hosting art shows and concerts and being profiled in publications including the *New York Times*. They looked at a second property, the Traveler's Motel down the road, which they renamed the Agave Inn. It would be defined by western film posters and bright paint coordinated with Mexican blankets. The Hamlet Inn in the Danish enclave of Solvang, about 45 minutes north, was next.

Then one weekend, Chris and Kenny went with a group of friends to Ojai, a spiritual centre to the south that's a hideaway for hippies, Hollywood stars and burned-out LA residents. Chris remembers driving by a wood-panelled roadside motel that screamed classic California. >



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“It was this nostalgic gem of a property and, of course, right as I drove by I was like, ‘Oh my God, what was that?’”

Three or four days later, he was negotiating the terms for another motel deal (each property is leased).

The Ojai Rancho Inn came at the right time. Unbeknownst to Chris and Kenny, the owner of the Presidio Motel – the duo’s first baby and foray in the industry – would not be renewing their property lease, just a few months before the Ojai motel was complete. The pair were heartbroken, says Chris, but it also felt a bit like fate.

“Ojai is referred to as a spiritual vortex,” laughs Chris. “I always jokingly say the spiritual vortex was looking out for us because the doors to Ojai Rancho Inn opened just as the Presidio doors closed.”

Ojai was an instant hit, decked out in Native American-style textiles, terracotta pots filled with cacti, polished log bed frames, indigo-dyed curtains, perforated metal pendant lights and artwork from psychedelic wood paintings to handmade dream catchers that all play on Ojai’s bohemian reputation. The pool deck retains its original 1950s charm but hosts regular barbecues set to live DJ beats. The Alamo Motel is the latest project, but Chris is looking at properties in Oakland, eastern Los Angeles, Joshua Tree and at another local institution, the Cliff House.

“I don’t care if we open one more property or 4000 more properties,” says Chris. “I just want to keep following my passions and create experiences with soul.”

At that, he lifts his wine glass. I see the word “soul” tattooed to the underside of his wrist, like a personal motto that has seeped into his veins. 🍷



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