



NEED AN ESCAPE AFTER THIS
YEAR'S EMOTIONAL ELECTION SEASON?
WE ROUNDED UP OUR FAVORITE HIGH DESERT
STAYCATION SPOTS SO YOU CAN GET SOME
REST AND RELAXATION.

WEEKEND GETAWAY

WORDS BY KRISTIN SCHARKEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANCE GERBER

DOME IN THE DESERT

What is it about the stark desert landscape that draws such a colorful cast of characters? This is the dichotomy that Brian and Kathrin Smirke evoke inside Dome in the Desert, their one-bedroom Joshua Tree rental with extraterrestrial ambience.

"I wanted this place to be special; I didn't want to put random stuff in here," Kathrin says. "[Guests] have said they feel like they're not on this planet right now. They're completely removed from everything. I wanted to have that vibe."

Fortune teller games and tarot cards can be found in the "meditation loft" bedecked in dreamcatchers and kilim pillows, accessed by a wooden ladder built by Brian himself. The aesthetic continues through the living space, which is punctuated by yellow accents amid the stark white lines of the dome. Kathrin found nearly every piece of furniture in the house from Craigslist, aside from the wood side tables that were being sold as firewood in downtown Yucca Valley, and a wooden chair she collected from the side of the road and reupholstered herself.

"I didn't have that much money but I wanted it to be cute," Kathrin explains. "I couldn't afford to go out and buy all these really expensive kilim pillows. But I set my little alerts on Craigslist and then every time specific key words popped up, I would get a text message and immediately call the person. I'm like, 'I'll be there in five minutes! Don't sell it to anybody!' Drive all the way across town to pick something up. But I feel like it also made it more special because it was like a treasure hunt."

There are personal touches throughout, like the neon window decals and mounted antlers that Kathrin made herself. (She spray painted the horns white to "make them look nicer" because Brian isn't a huge fan of taxidermy.) Or the 1920s-door-turned-



table that the couple made after a Los Angeles home development project – its glass core contains pieces of poems written by Kathrin. Even a white Ikea daybed received an update with new knobs and one of Brian's childhood blankets from Mexico. Also not to be missed: a swing on the Urban Outfitters hanging chair.

The Smirkes first encounter with the dome was serendipitous in and of itself, as Kathrin posted an ad for a cabin on Craigslist after their first visit to Joshua Tree. "I didn't think anyone would email me; I don't even know why I put that ad up," she recalls. "This guy emailed me back with a picture of the dome. It used to be pink with a green roof, and I saw the picture – I had no idea what it could cost or anything – and I called Brian like, 'Oh my god, I found the house. It's a dome!'"

Since then, the couple has renovated another Airbnb property, Cabin Cabin Cabin, and is working on a third, The Shack Attack. They brand their projects under the name, "We are in our Element,"

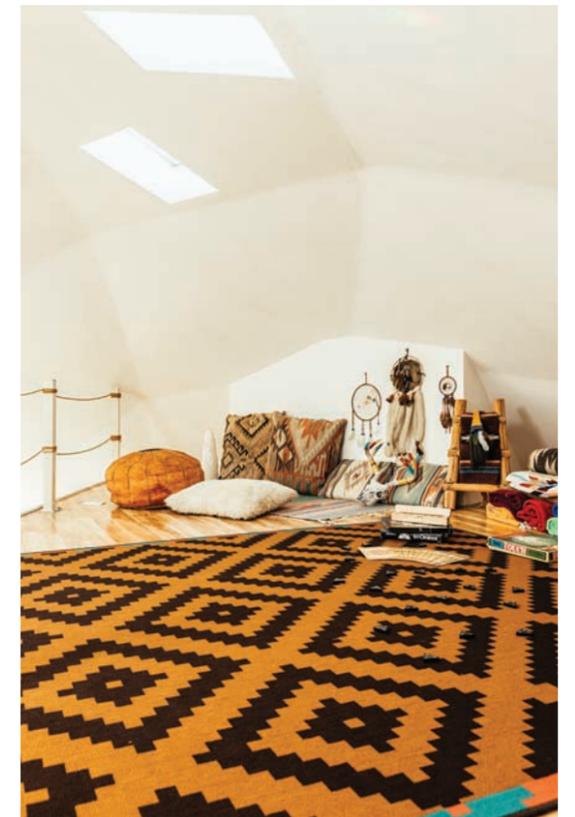


IF YOU STAY

COST: \$185 per night

SLEEPS: Up to four guests

TIP: While the dome accommodates four people, it's a comfortable getaway for two; bring packets of hot chocolate to sip in the two Adirondack chairs outside, while you watch the sun go down.



an homage to the jobs they've done completely on their own terms, for their own aesthetic. You can see it in the geometric wall decals Kathrin created in place of a headboard in the bedroom, and the blue shibori comforter she hand-dyed herself.

"I always say [Joshua Tree] is like our generation's Big Sur," Brian says. "You had this influx of all these people going to Big Sur, all these writers and artists when it was cheap trying to escape the cities. It's so oversaturated right now, and you can't afford it. Everyone's trying to find their space but where do you go? For whatever reason, Joshua Tree has become that space for a lot of creative people. I really think it's a cool time to be here."



OFF-GRID IT HOUSE

Walk through the front door of architect Linda Taalman's Off-grid itHouse, and the expanses of Pioneertown open up before you. From inside the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, you can see towering boulder formations, Joshua and yucca trees, scrub oaks and pinyon pines – a transcendent melding of mountain- and desert-scapes. Welcome to a home billed as one of the top 10 Airbnb rentals worldwide.

“It really is about a relationship between the inhabitant and the site where the house is located,” Taalman says of this living space which allows visitors to directly tune in with the environment. “You don’t have television; you don’t have an easy way to communicate. Phones don’t really work where we are, so part of it is almost a self-imposed deprivation of all that distracting input that one normally has in daily life

today, [which] has gotten worse and worse since we built the house.”

The 1,100-square-foot prefabricated home was the prototype for Taalman's itHouse design system – created with her former partner, Alan Koch – which utilizes “smarter materials” (Bosch aluminum framing and an Epic steel roof system) as well as “smarter building processes” to decrease construction time and footprint. There's no welding involved, not to mention drywall or tile. The majority of the Solar Ban 60 glass walls open up, allowing for airflow in the summer, and the cement floors radiate heat in winter. One hundred

percent off the grid, the house runs entirely on solar power for energy and water.

The rental is isolated but quaintly insulated: Cozy up with a book on the king bed in the master bedroom, and leave the Elody Blanchard-designed thick felt curtains pulled back even as you fall asleep. With the view, you'll wake up feeling like you're beneath the open sky. Or, you can revel in another panorama while making coffee in the kitchen. Taalman's team changed the floorplan on-site during construction so that residents could enjoy the view.



“[The kitchen] was originally going to be where the living room is and there were tall [cabinets],” she explains. “As soon as we got there and realized how amazing this view was going to be in all directions and how much exposure we could really have, we didn’t want any tall cabinets installed. So the kitchen island is made as one block of all lower cabs, and there’s no real obstruction.”

The cabinets are stocked with table settings, appliances and board games – make drinks for up to four (there’s a queen bed in the second bedroom) and enjoy them in the Kenneth Cobonpue woven lounge beside a fire in the suspended Fire Orb fireplace. Taalman chose each piece of furniture in the living area for its ability to serve as an “extension of the landscape.”

“The idea was to have furniture that blended with the landscape outside, so it would have similar colors or maybe materials,” she says. “And also to have things which were transparent or had the ability to see through them, so we have a lot of furniture that is actually open but it’s not made of glass. It’s not cold, it’s more natural materials and that way, it really is ... the landscape coming into the building.”

Down the hall, you’ll find a Duravit bath, but don’t fill it up after cloudy days or you’ll lose power for the rest of the night. Taalman plans to install more solar panels this year to help guests get through the winter months but says “you do have to think a little differently” during a stay.

“This house was an experiment to see just how little you need,” she explains. “The idea was not to design the house for perfect comfort 100 percent of the time because then you’re overdoing it the rest of the time.”

But these accommodations are as rejuvenating as it gets. Add fresh-pressed juice delivery from high desert artist Angela de la Agua (which must be ordered ahead), and you’ve got a respite that’s at once private and panoramic – perfect to enjoy with loved ones, young or old.



IF YOU STAY

COST: \$380 per night on weekdays, \$400 per night on weekends

SLEEPS: Up to four guests

TIP: Owner and architect Linda Taalman suggests hiking to Hondo Wash, about 2 miles north of the property, to take in the surrounding flora and fauna.

JOSHUA TREE CASITA

We can't decide which room is our favorite in Rich and Sara Combs' Joshua Tree Casita. The desert-inspired master bedroom, with a full-size macramé curtain handmade by Sara's mother? The second bedroom with two sets of wooden French doors that open up to expansive acres of undisturbed land? Or the inviting living room with a wood-burning fireplace, Crosley record player and vintage desert map?

"Our whole idea here is you come out to the desert to take a step back and relax – watch the sun rise and the sun set, and look at the stars and be present again," Sara explains. "We wanted to translate that inside of the house to slower living. There's no microwave. You can make your coffee by drip, and we have a hand-grinder. Everything's a little slower."

Mosey in through the Old West-inspired gate to find a spacious yard and twinkle light-bedecked patio, complete with a hammock, hot tub, chaise lounges and picnic tables for entertaining. You might even run into Lady, a local desert tortoise. While the Combs have found that "the Casita is for lovers" (five couples have gotten engaged there since it was listed), they make exceptions to their 'four overnight guests' rule for pre-arranged dinner parties of up to 20 people. The kitchen is stocked with everything a host might need – just add a few candles and rosemary trimmings from the bushes around the property, and you're ready for an evening of entertaining.

Once it gets cool, warm up next to the stove under the wooden ceiling hand-stained by the Combs. Put on a record and read a book from their Sky Village Swap Meet collection, or strum the guitar on a saddle seat from Pioneer Crossing Antiques. "Some people have said, 'Oh, you don't want to put nice things in the space because people might break it or ruin it,'" Sara says. "Our intention the whole time was if we put nice things, people will treat it nicely. So far, that's been very true 99 percent of the time."

There are myriad works by local makers and friends on display, including a piece by Oakland-based woodworker Aleksandra Zee; a painting by Denver artist Stella Maria Baer; a wall hanging by Los Angeles company Blockshop Textiles; and patterned planters by Joshua Tree ceramicist BKB Ceramics.



IF YOU STAY

COST: \$195 per night on weekdays, \$225 per night on weekends

SLEEPS: Up to four guests

TIP: Bring your bathing suit no matter the season; warm up in the hot tub or fill the metal basin for a dip with a view.



You can also find Sara's own work inside the closet of the guest bedroom. In the master, a framed set of photos by designer Julia Kostreva depicts the Combs' home, a local homestead and the view from the Casita. "We based the color of this house on that homestead," Rich says of the middle image. "We actually jumped out of the car, put paint chips up to it and were like, 'Oh, this one's the closest to it.'" The result – on the home's exterior – is a muted, dusty rose.

The Combs also rent out a larger property, The Joshua Tree House, downtown; you can find small ties to that spot throughout the Casita. The tiles over the bed in the guestroom were gathered from a box in a shed behind that original property. "We didn't have to cut the tile at all," Rich says. "It lined up perfectly. That never happens."

Somewhat fortuitous, this type of occurrence is normal for the Combs. Perhaps it's because they find ways to honor the past (the corner behind the stove is how the Casita looked when they bought it) and give of themselves while cultivating a new kind of congruity. Those side tables in the guest room? They were their personal ones for years after they bought them at a flea market. That mirror hanging in the master? It was already on a wall when they bought the house. And that wood hanger inside the closet? They found it on the property. "We want the houses to dictate the design a little bit," Rich says. "We want it to be its own thing." 🌱



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