



WELCOME TO WACO

A Tale of Two Vacation Destinations

By Gretchen Eichenberg

Photographs by Jennifer Pisarcik, icometotheephoto.com
& Jack Matson, jaxaerial.com

During what might have been the worst of times, two local visionaries spent the tumultuous past two years of the pandemic dreaming, planning, working and building vacation rental properties that they hoped would breathe new life into the local hospitality scene. One focused on remodeling older homes in urban Waco neighborhoods and transforming them into dreamy, family-friendly cottages with space to spare. The other started with a scenic wedding pavilion overlooking a small lake in McGregor and expanded it into a collection of rustic modern cabins that offer an up-close-and-personal experience on an animal preserve. For both — and the guests who visit their properties — it has truly become some of the best of times.



URBAN *delights*

Waco native Robin Cohagen, 38, is the owner, designer and host of three spacious, yet cozy homestays nestled in one of Waco's older residential neighborhoods called Brook Oaks, which is near downtown. Extensively renovated and full of modern-day amenities, Cohagen has worked to preserve the integrity of the homes while giving them each their own feel. She and her husband, Josh, have three daughters ages 9, 7 and 5.

"Josh and I started flipping houses in 2017 and, I mean, you just figure it out as you go," Cohagen said. "We did great on the first one, but it kind of scared us because we were coming to the very end of when we needed to sell it. And we were like, we're gonna lose money if we don't sell up. And it worked out so great."

Later they joined forces with another couple, Brian and Stephanie Claus, and decided mid-project that turning the house into an Airbnb could be a good investment.

"Once we got it up and decorated, we were like, OK this can work," Cohagen said. "This is actually a better return long term than it would be to just a flip and be done."

A mix of Magnolia visitors and Baylor parents is a big share of Cohagen's guests. "There are also people coming to town for business and they'll stay here for a work trip or something like that. But you can always count on Baylor parents coming to see their kids. I've had families say that Waco is on their bucket list which still blows my mind."

She also sees a lot of girl trips, as the homes are spacious with plenty of beds and bathrooms to accommodate a group.

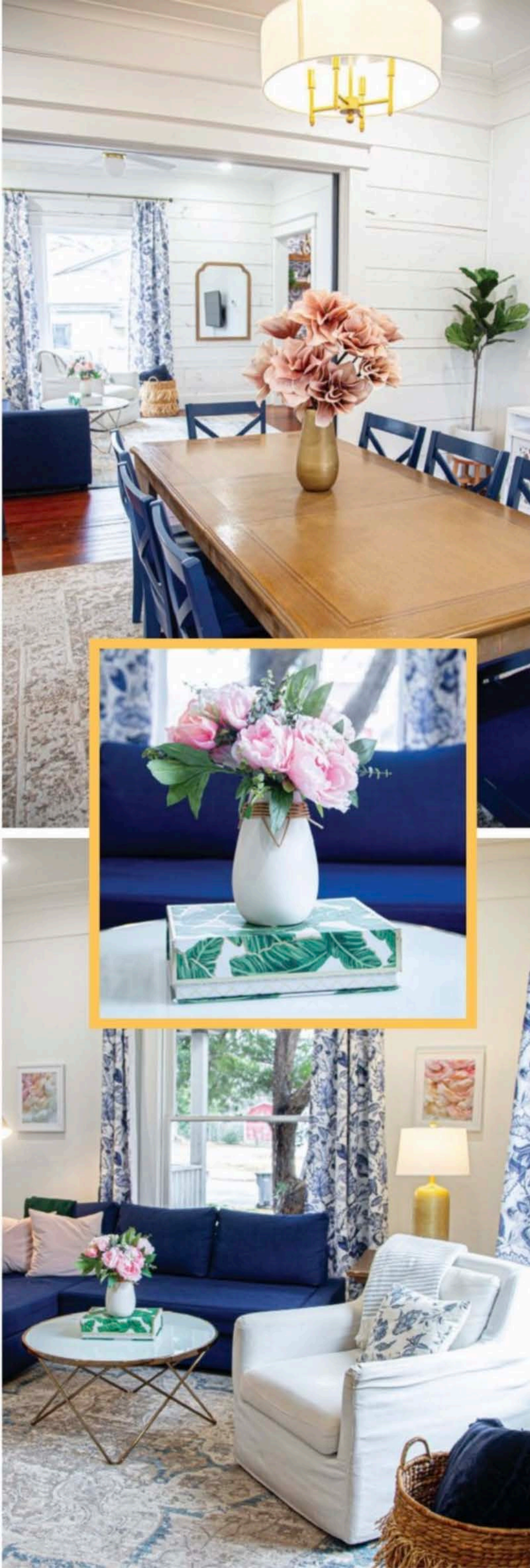
"I actually like to spend my birthday at South Haven," she said. "I'll invite all my girlfriends there and we spend the night and have fun."

Cohagen said she knew there were people looking for just this kind of place to stay. "When I would go to Silobration or Baylor events, I would ask people where they were staying," Cohagen said. "They would say, we found a place out in Elm Mott or Eddie or Gatesville, or we're staying at the Motel 6 because there was nowhere left to stay. These are the big event weekends. There was a need. And I wanted to be one of these people that has a place for people to stay, a place they are happy about, instead of driving forever to get into town or staying in a terrible place."

The Haven homes are all located in neighborhoods that some might consider on the fringe of low-income. But the streets are full of houses that were once-loved — and many still-loved, but needing fresh facelifts. Other are owned and occupied by people Cohagen now calls friends.

"Waco is a patchwork city," Cohagen said. "Especially if you want to be close to downtown and the life and everything. Some houses in the neighborhoods are flipped, some are not. We're still revitalizing the city. Our homes are surrounded by nice people, good people. We take care of each other. I have

Opening Page: Robin Cohagen puts finishing touches out for guests at South Haven, one of three vacation rentals near downtown Waco where she welcomes folks from all over. **Right:** From wedding venue to animal sanctuary, Matt Lieberman, a self-described "city kid" and owner of Blue Hills Ranch, feeds two giraffes who call one of Waco's most unique vacation destinations home. **Pictured:** Painted a very happy blue, South Haven on Bosque Boulevard comfortably accommodates up to 10 people. Cohagen and her sister, an interior designer in San Antonio, worked together on the design and decor in all three homes.







Pictured: For those looking for a soft, romantic get away with fairytale charm, Haven House, themed after the book and film “The Princess Bride,” hits a sweet spot. Guests will find nods to the story throughout the home, including quotes and a copy of the book on the bedside table. Rooms named after the main protagonists of the story, Buttercup and Wesley, contribute to the whimsical atmosphere of the home that was previously owned by the well-known Baylor baseball coach Duren Schroeder.



their phone numbers in case anything goes wrong. We feel very settled in these neighborhoods.”

Getting a good deal on the houses is what makes it work and Cohagen said she loves seeing the homes get their turn to shine again. “You kind of start to learn the numbers really well,” she said. “Like flooring is going to cost this and roofing is going to cost this and plumbing and electrical. So when you look at a deal, you can kind of plugin a formula and say, wow, this is not enough of a deal for it to work for us. But the market has changed so much. I think we got the first house that we looked at for something like under \$50,000, but we had to put a lot into it, of course.”

Cohagen works in tandem with her sister Bree Leonard, an interior designer in San Antonio. “It’s been a lot of fun working with her,” Cohagen said. “We share ideas and design strategies with each other and our work on these homes has brought us both clients. Our dream is to work for different Airbnbs, go stay there for a month, fix it up and then leave.”

A personal desire to help revitalize some of Waco’s older neighborhoods is part of Cohagen’s purpose. “We have talked a lot about investing in east Waco and my husband had a lot of ideas but, at the time, it just didn’t work out. And so our dreams have had to shift here and there, but we love being part of the growth of Waco. And even if it happens in baby steps, one person can come in and do something and then others see it and hopefully are inspired.”

Social media, Airbnb and her website — havencraft.com — are how Cohagen advertises her properties to potential guests. “I do social media because I want people to know what’s going on in Waco,” she said. “I just want to be part of that. I guess I just love Waco. I love that it’s growing.”

Painted a very happy blue, South Haven, located at 2124 Bosque Boulevard, is a 100-year-old Craftsman-style house with a big wrap-around porch.

“We remodeled it, gutted the whole thing in 2019,” she said. “I think it was three bedrooms or maybe two bedrooms at the time. Now it’s a four bedroom, three bathroom house.”

Decorated in a classic Southern style, this two-story home has a light, fresh feel with charming blue-and-white decor. With four bedrooms, six beds and three bathrooms, it accommodates 10 people comfortably. The bedrooms are named for classic Southern characters, like Scarlett and Rhett from “Gone With The Wind” and also Johnny and June, as in, Cash.

The master bedroom, Scarlett, is luxurious with a pretty bathroom that features a Lindsey Letters painting hanging above a big stand-alone tub.

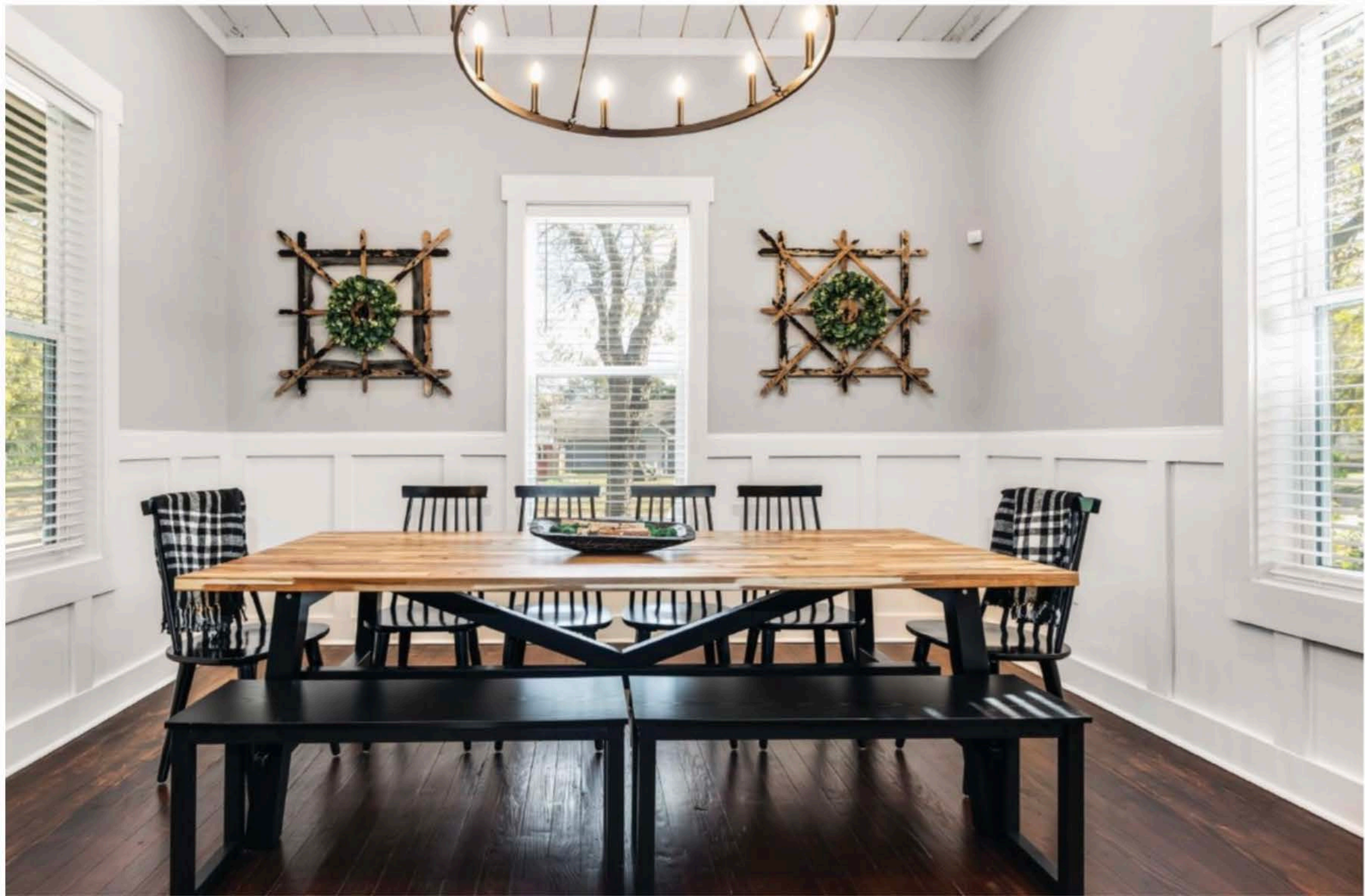
The kitchen is spacious and stocked with appliances — and the dining table seats eight and is perfect for enjoying a meal with family and friends. The dining room connects to a comfortable living area and TV room. A walk-through coffee bar off the kitchen just feels luxurious. Lots of details, like original pocket doors, let guests know they are in an historic place.

At 822 North 17th Street, Haven House is a Farmhouse style property that the Cohagens built from the ground up after the original home was destroyed in a fire. Only the original stairs were intact, but the place has personal





Pictured: You'll never want to leave the comfort of this "Robin Hood"-themed home. Wooden accents give the decor at the modern lodge, Glen Haven, a rustic feel, while forest murals and pops of dark green and bright orange provide a playful atmosphere that is perfect for adventurous families.



significance for Cohagen.

"The house was owned by Dutch Schroeder, a well-known Baylor baseball coach," she said. "He was friends with my grandfather, Donald I. Moore, the Baylor band director who wrote the "Mighty Bears Fight Song" and named them the "Golden Wave Band."

The home sleeps seven with three bedrooms and two-and-a-half bathrooms. When Cohagen and her sister were designing the home, they would always get confused with the upstairs bedrooms.

"We were like, are we talking about the front bedroom or the back one," she said. "So finally, we decided to just name the bedrooms. And so that's how it became "The Princess Bride" house. We named one Buttercup and the other Wesley."

The theme took off from there — and it was also the beginning of incorporating a theme into all three homes. In each home, guests will find little nods to everything from southern hospitality to adventure.

There's a nice, big kitchen, fully-stocked with appliances of course, and a dining room that seats eight. All the Haven homes include a high chair and pack-n-play for the kids.

The upstairs landing features three white birds that were one of the spring installs at Magnolia Silos, which Cohagen purchased for a dollar each at Magnolia's Little Shop on Bosque.

For those looking for a modern lodge-like retreat, Glen Haven, located at 523 Garland Avenue, is a woodsy getaway in the city. It sleeps 12 with four bedrooms, eight beds and two bathrooms.

Lovely details, like a forest mural painted by local artist Carrie Stout, truly bring the Robin Hood theme of this home to life. Vintage architectural pieces from one of Waco's early-day banks give the home character.

This house has a spacious kitchen and dining area, a rustic, but luxurious master suite and a bunk room for the kids complete with a map of Robin Hood's adventures and pillows with different woodland animals on them.

If guests take a peek into a wooden box located in the master bedroom, they will find the lyrics to "(Everything I Do) I Do It For You" by Brian Adams, which was in the movie "Robin Hood Prince of Thieves." It's details like this that make the Haven homes something special.

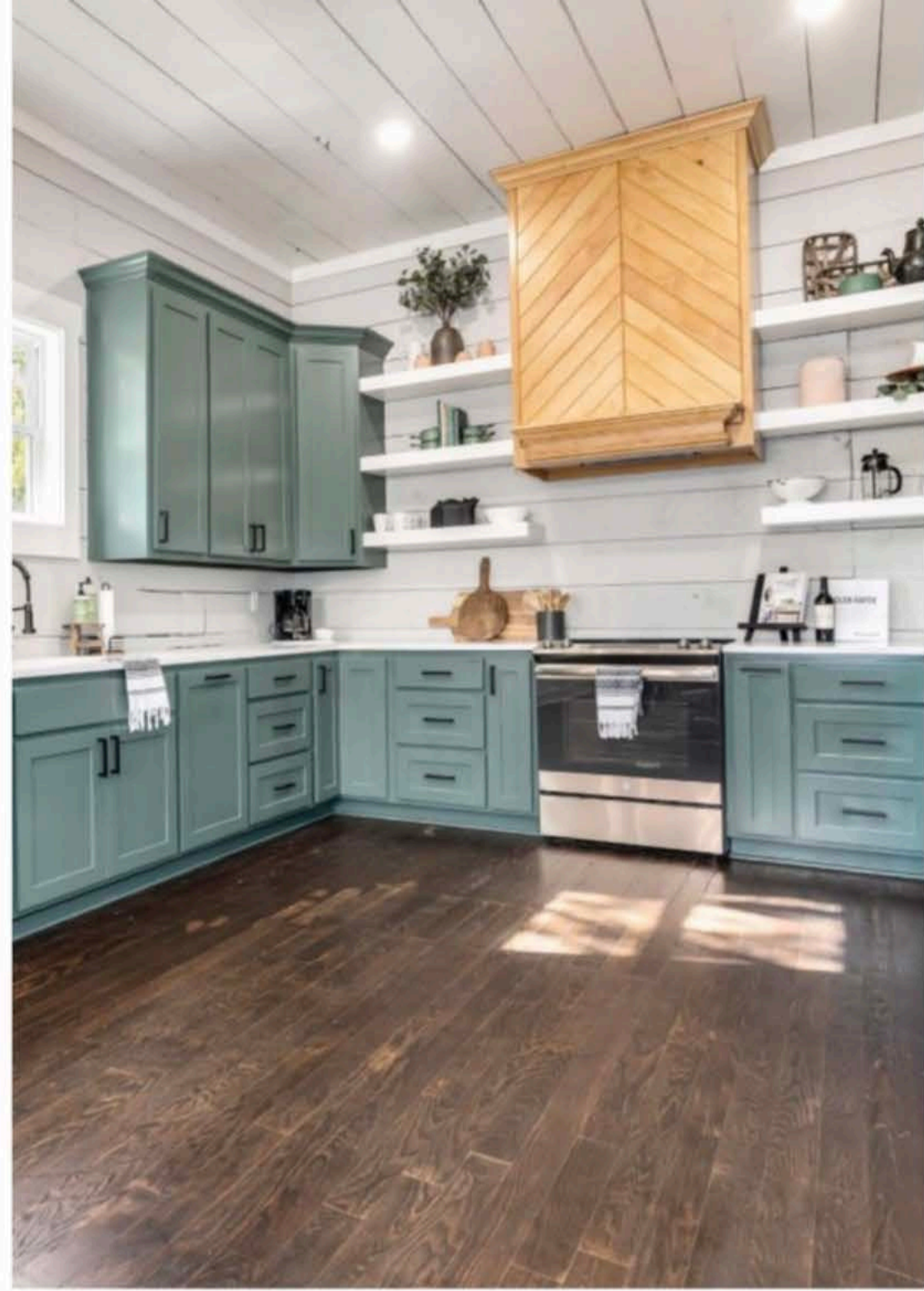
"I had my mom write they lyrics in calligraphy," Cohagen said. "I don't know if anyone will ever see them, but I know they are there."

Cohagen is the first to admit that designing and running vacation rentals is a team effort.

"Doing this business is not something that I could do on my own," she said. "I have my sister to help me design the homes or even something as simple as decide where to move a chair. We'll talk about what that room needs. So I have a team around me and I am thankful for that."

She has a house manager and cleaners, as well as a maintenance man — her co-owner Brian Claus — who can fix anything. And Cohagen said she loves being able to recommend local restaurants to her guests. Some of her favorites are breakfast at nearby Harvest on 25th, Baked Bliss or Lolita's. For dinner, Cohagen suggests the burger at DiCampli or pizza at Moroso.

Challenges come with the territory when you are working hard to meet the varying needs of house guests,



Cohagen said.

"The most difficult thing is high maintenance guests who have a lot of questions before they even book," she said. "Like, can I have this discount? Can I bring my dog? And there are no pets allowed. Or, can I have this many people over to the house because we're celebrating? And Airbnb is really strict about no parties. So I have to be really careful about that. The thing about pets is hard because I know people come with allergies other people have a service animal and I don't want to say no to that. So you just to just figure all that out. Those moments have been challenging, but for the most part it's smooth sailing."

But hearing how much her guests enjoyed their stay is one of the most rewarding parts of owning and renting her homes, Cohagen said. It makes everything worthwhile.

"I love when people come in and they say your house is so beautiful," she said. "Or they say it felt so peaceful. We could all just hang out and do things together. It's a great place to come and relax. When people say that they had a good time or when they ask me questions, it makes me feel like OK, this is something that they didn't just enjoy, but they really admire."



Cohagen's exquisite attention to detail stands out as a contributing factor to the warmth and charm of the spaces she welcomes visitors into. She said it's not always easy, but hearing how much guests enjoyed their stay makes everything worthwhile.



WILDEST *dreams*

Set on 150 acres of rolling hills of bluebonnets is the aptly named Blue Hills Ranch, a rustic chic wedding venue overlooking a lake on a pastoral property outside McGregor. Owner Matt Lieberman, a California businessman and former EMT who wanted to escape all things California, moved to Texas in 2019 because he grew up visiting family in the area and thought it would be a great place for a retirement project. But the ranch has been transformed into much more than a cool place to get married outdoors. It's turned into something he never planned or even imagined in his wildest dreams.

"I started building in September of 2019 and then COVID hit," Lieberman said. "The only thing this was supposed to be was just a wedding venue. I thought — weddings — have one on a Saturday do nothing on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday."

So, he built a 6,183-square foot climate-controlled barn that is surrounded by porches and beautiful views and two cabins next door where the bride and groom can get dressed. He got a few cows and some deer to add to the atmosphere. People loved it, especially with COVID-19 dampening everyone's ability to gather and have fun.

Slowly — yet also suddenly — people began offering different animals that might enjoy living on the ranch. A lady donated her mini donkeys, Bonnie and Clyde. Someone else needed to re-home a horse. Then, Lieberman adopted four wild Mustangs from Utah.

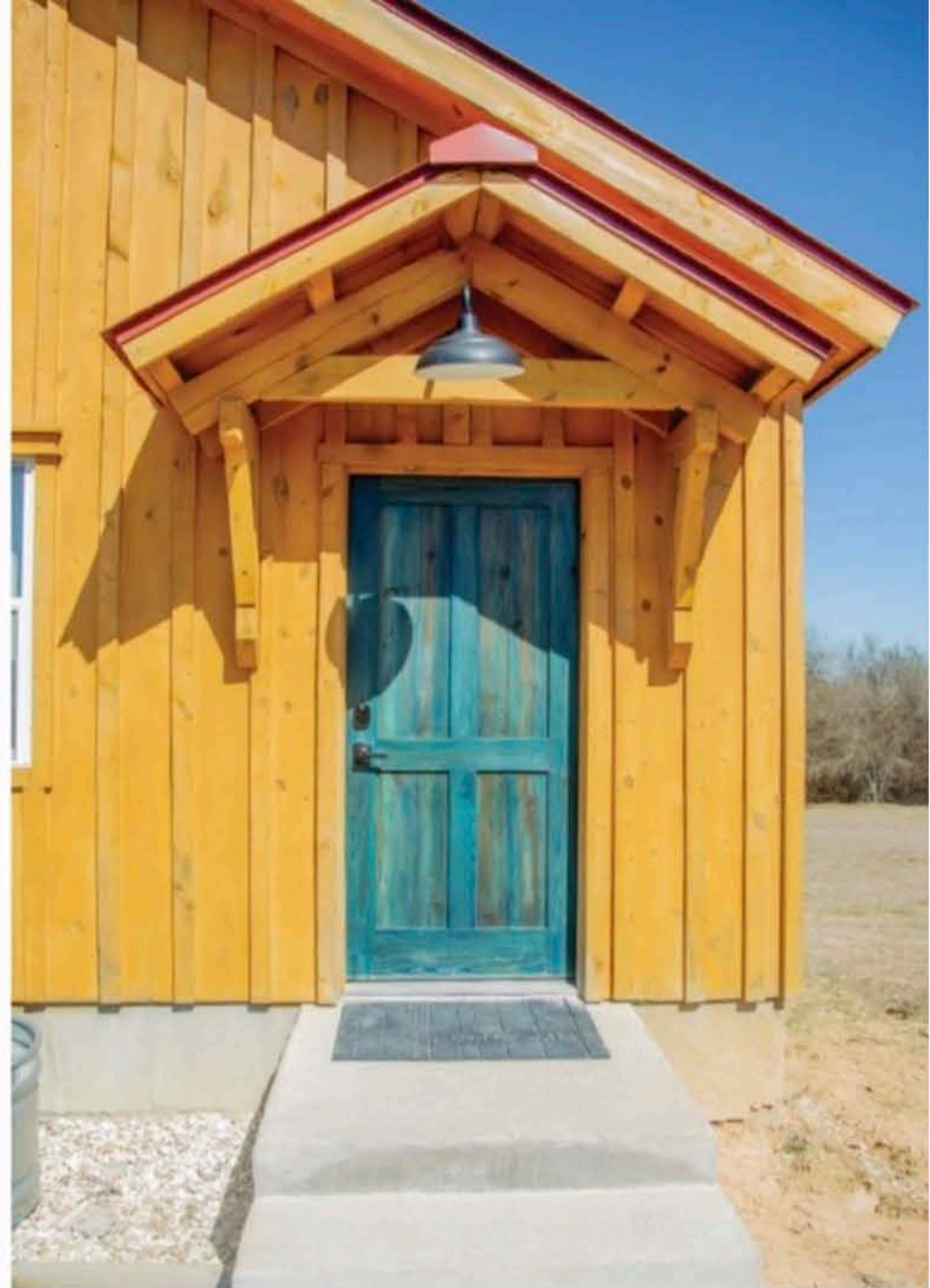
"It kind of snowballed into something I wasn't expecting or prepared for," he said. "I love animals, but I don't know a whole lot. I'm not a rancher or a hunter. I'm a city kid who came to the country. I don't even know how to put a saddle on a horse."

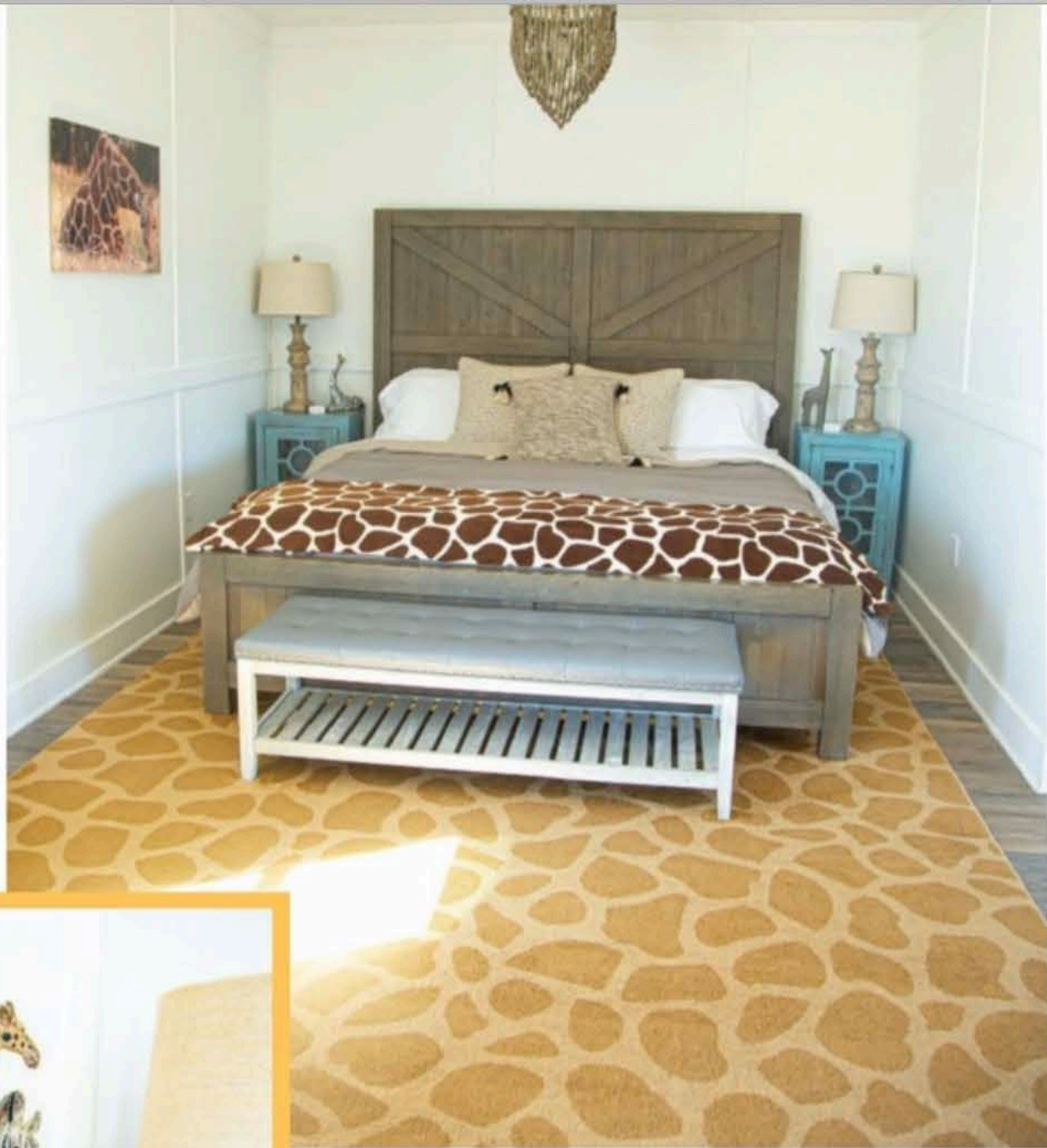
But that didn't matter to Lieberman when he realized his property — and ability to provide a natural habitat for homeless animals — could fulfill a need. So, the ranch officially became an animal sanctuary. The laid-back Lieberman seems to be up for anything. Someone asked if he was going to get giraffes and he said he thought, "Sure."

Now he has two of them — and zebra, buffalo, kangaroos, otters and a nine-month-old camel. It's a pretty magnificent sight to see many of them roaming free, basking in the sunlight and green fields.

"It all just kind of happened," Lieberman said. "I didn't plan any of this, but it just worked out. The public has driven a lot of it, to be honest."

Top: One of the cabins at Blue Hills Ranch where visitors can enjoy peace, serenity and an abundance of wild-life. **Bottom:** The laid-back owner of Blue Hills Ranch, Matt Lieberman feeds Bonnie and Clyde, two donkeys who sometimes knock on the cabin doors looking for treats.







Left: When Lieberman decided to rent the two cabins for overnight guests, he designed and decorated the interiors all on his own with one giraffe-themed and one zebra-themed. **Above:** The cows meandering the 150-acre ranch in McGregor help add to the atmosphere and experience.

Locating in Texas just made sense to Lieberman, who still owns a heart imaging company in California. He said he is considering bringing that business to Texas, as well.

“When I looked at getting out of California, I lived in Georgia for about five years,” he said. “I liked the south and I liked the different, non-California way. But when I started looking at buying property, Texas made sense. I didn’t want to do big city cause I came from the big city. So, this is where I chose. And a lot of it made business sense too, because it is in between Dallas and Austin.”

After the wedding business took off, Lieberman decided to try renting out the two cabins, which are perched on a small bluff, in the off-season. He decorated one in a giraffe theme and the other with zebra details. Both are airy and full of light, furnished with plush beds and a seating area and a fully-equipped kitchenette. He plans to add hot tubs on the decks, as well. The donkeys often knock on the cabin doors, looking for a snack, and Lieberman said he hopes to add a giraffe feeding experience from the back decks.

“People always ask me, how’d you decorate it,” Lieberman said. “I’m just a single guy who lives out here and I decorated it during COVID. So, when I went into Bob Mills and Home Zone and said, hey, I like this, this and this. They said, yeah, we only have that. That’s how I decorated it. There was no special decorator. It was just me.”

He recently added RV pads and plans to start welcoming travelers this spring.

“People just gave me that idea,” Lieberman said. “Why don’t you do some RV pads? I was like, I don’t even own an RV. I’ve never stayed in an RV before. So, a lot of the stuff is just driven by the public and it’s changed from what I thought it

was going to be.”

But he doesn’t seem to mind at all — in fact, he relishes it.

“What actually blew me away was how quickly this became our business model,” he said. “I wish I would have never built that barn and only built cabins. I make more money on the cabins and it’s easier and more fun because people are out here because they want to see the animals. It’s more fun than dealing with a bunch of drunk people at a wedding.”

There are six people on staff at the ranch now and the cabins are always booked, Lieberman said.

“They’re filled every single day,” he said. “I don’t have any openings. Like, literally, I don’t. Guests come from all over — Dallas and Houston to Maine and Mexico City.”

This spring, three new family-friendly cabins have opened up in a different area of the ranch, taking the experience to a whole new level of wildness: pirate adventures. The exquisitely-designed cabins — Hook, Kraken and Scallywag — have a pirate ship feel with lofts and hand-painted murals, even in the showers. The cabins accommodate six guests each.

“We’ve got a weird, crazy story about why pirates are in McGregor, Texas,” Lieberman said.

“So we’re going to have a little fun with it, but we’re not revealing that just yet.”

Lieberman hopes to incorporate some fun kid events as well.

“Everything here just kind of happens as it happens,” Lieberman said.

That may very well be the secret to Lieberman’s success — letting the dream come together naturally. You can find out more by visiting www.bluehillsranch.com.