

glorious REBELLION

Thirty years ago, a British decorator ditched London to start a family in middle-of-nowhere Spain—where she transformed a crumbling pile of bricks into their home and, eventually, opened it as a one-of-a-kind hotel. **Charlotte Scott** tells us about bringing Trasierra to life.

photographs by **JAMES WADDELL** *produced by* **RITA KONIG**



Scott in the last bit of Trasierra, her Spanish estate, that she's still renovating.

Although it's uprooted from England, Scott's decorating couldn't be more grounded in its tradition.

RUFFLED PILLOW FABRIC Cowtan & Tout glazed cotton "Bailey Rose" about \$118/yard, cowtan.com for information
SOFA FABRIC (similar to shown) "Cub Palm" \$14.95/yard, housefabric.com



I found the house early on in my hunt. Whether it was luck, impatience or love at first sight, I don't know, but from the moment I glimpsed it from a rocky gorge overlooking the blue ridges of the Sierra Morena mountains, Trasierra has been my life's work.

It was 1978. My husband and I had fled London in search of adventure. Back then, we were city folk—he was in advertising and I was a decorator. (You know the old-school, hands-on, put-away-the-swatch-book, woman-who-helps-you-with-your-house sort of decorator—i.e., untrained, good eye? That's what I was.) But Spain is where I was born, and it was in Spain that I had always promised myself I would raise my children.

We were shown the estate on a cold and murky day. An abandoned, decrepit manse—parts of it date to the 15th century—set amid 450 acres of orange groves and vineyards, towering palms and olive trees, it almost seemed a natural feature of the hills. The house itself was cloaked in a veil of mist that couldn't hide broken green shutters, cracked olive vats and terra-cotta roofs, and split and rotting window frames. But wet winter jasmine, wood smoke,



Scott giving art lessons in the hotel's initial years.



When the hotel opened, Scott's children were the staff. From left, Jackson, Gioconda, George and Amber.



For their 1996 Christmas card, Scott and her daughters made dresses from linen, wire and tennis balls.

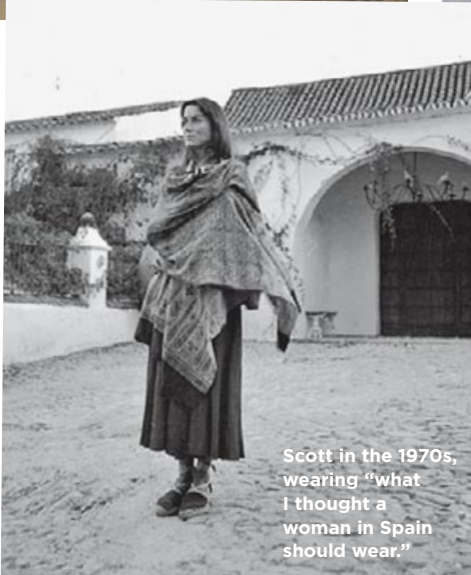
Those early days were nearly perfect. We had no electricity, but we didn't see this as a drawback—we just lived by the light of the sun and used paraffin lamps and candles to illuminate our nocturnal goings-on.



Gioconda entertaining visitors as a flamenco dancer, 1995.



Trasierra today, from the same vantage that Scott first spied it in 1978.



Scott in the 1970s, wearing "what I thought a woman in Spain should wear."





Organic seeds for the garden.

pine, eucalyptus and tangerines perfumed the air, and, peering beyond the decaying masonry, I could picture whitewashed courtyards, cushioned verandas, rose bowers beside tinkling fountains and wisteria curling over iron pergolas. I remember stepping out of the car into the rain and saying, "We need look no further."

Of course, we bought the place, paid for it in cash handed over in a dark bar on a rainwashed road outside Málaga, and never glanced back. The next 15 years were spent converting a cluster of outbuildings, cellars, storerooms and pigpens into a paradise on earth (at least, I think it is).

Those early days were quite idyllic. We started off in the chapel with a bed, a piano, a poodle and a pram, and moved outward. Water was pumped from an artesian well and emerged icy cold from a thin brass tap in the yard. I warmed it on the gas rings where I cooked our food. We had no electricity, but for six years we didn't consider this a drawback as we toiled by the light of the sun and used paraffin lamps and candles to illuminate our nocturnal goings-on. In fact, we congratulated ourselves on the money we saved by keeping our wardrobes small (less washing), staying put (less gas), writing letters (fewer telephone calls) and going to bed promptly (no electric bills).

Gradually—and four children later—we tamed the wilds into our own Elysian fields. The outbuildings, granaries, olive presses, barns and stables became bedrooms, dressing rooms, bathrooms, guest rooms and nurseries. A gigantic, cathedral-like building where donkeys once patiently circled, powering the vast granite presses that made the estate wine a century ago, was carved into a library and screening room—ideal for watching *Casablanca* and hosting raucous weddings.



Gioconda and George on their neighbor's horses, 2008.

Jackson "mending" the roof, 1994.



The family's ever-growing sun-hat collection.

To do all this, I crisscrossed Andalucía, children in tow, bargaining in scrap yards for railings and old doors, persuading carpenters to take apart and copy a table here or follow my drawings of a tray or a lamp stand there, and tracking down artisans and convincing them to come out of retirement to teach us how things were done.

I asked the nuns in the nearby convent if they knew of a girl who could sew well, ostensibly to make my family clothes, but my plan was to show her how to make bigger clothes—for beds, windows and sofas, daybeds and tables. Finally a shy 16-year-old appeared, accompanied by her mother and her aunt—and the same family still works here, 23 years later. We learned together, poring over and translating from a book called *Traditional Upholstery Revealed*.

I amassed a collection of discontinued fabrics in every possible color and weight (including the contents of a Hebridean tweed mill that had closed down). Combining them with cream canvas, burlaps, twills, bunting and calico and using different textures for pipings, button-in linings and quilting, I managed to furnish and decorate what have now become around 30 rooms.


Over time, however, what was still a dream for me began to seem less so for my husband, and 10 years into our grand experiment, he returned to London. I never once doubted that I would stay, but going

SOFA FABRIC (similar to shown) "Como" in Cordovan \$27.99/yard, calicocorners.com **FLORAL CHAIR FABRIC** (similar to shown) #RUD 1280 \$29.95/yard, housefabric.com **LARGE ARTWORKS** Paco Carvajal custom portraits, pacocarvajal.com for other works by artist



Over the years, Scott's huge living room has become a temple to comfort, with personal touches enhancing the coziness: portraits of her children flanking the fireplace, a pair of table lamps she made out of garden urns and tree bark, red-lacquered magnolia leaves above the mantel (a holiday decoration that never came down).

dominomag.com



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if they knew of a girl who could sew well....

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Scott painted her hallway—the first “room” she inhabited at Trasierra—pale, pale pink to bring out the floor tiles. In the winter months, she replaces the gray pleated-linen cloth with a woolly one.

the distance alone would take some doing—which is to say, how Trasierra became a hotel was just another part of its evolution reaching a practical conclusion. I opened the doors to visitors in 1992, and word slowly got around that this was the place for people who don't like hotels, who are seeking peace, beauty and relief from the tedium of television news and piped music chosen for somebody else's enjoyment.

I am a very uneasy guest and so have strong opinions about making mine feel at ease—at least, at ease in the way that I would like, meaning, the way you feel when the hostess is away. This entails plenty of books

WALL PAINT (similar to shown) Mellow Pink #2094-70, benjaminmoore.com for stores
 HEADBOARD (similar to shown, opposite page) “Stevenson” from \$559 ballarddesigns.com

Combining a collection of discontinued
fabrics in every possible color and weight with canvas,
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For her bedroom, Scott designed a half-tester bed, copying the carved frieze on top from a piece of wood discovered in rubble.

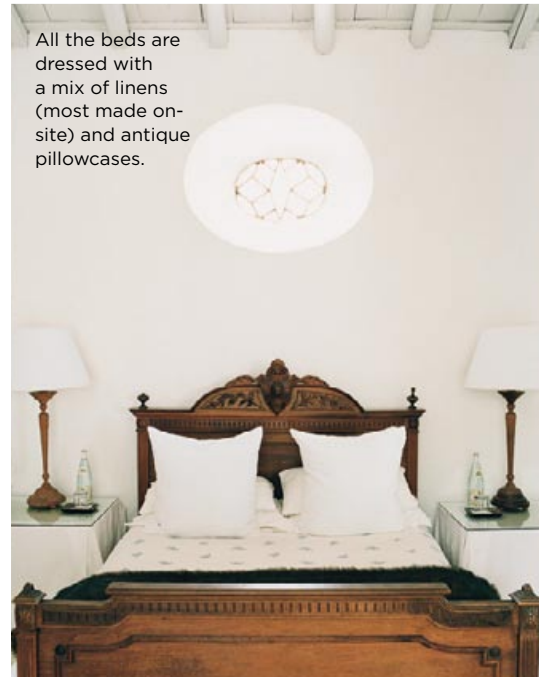
and places to escape to, comfortable beds, soft sheets, good pillows, access to drinks and tea and the feeling that one has everything one needs, including sun hats.

There is nothing starchy or grand about Trasierra. Within its walls, you're part of what set out to be a family home and has now, unbelievably to everyone—especially me—been voted by *Tatler* as among the 101 best hotels in the world! Once upon a time, such acknowledgment would have struck me as the perfect conclusion—the happy, fairy-tale ending to what has already been an unbelievable fantasy. But along the way, I changed my mind. These days, our regular guests are often the children or grandchildren of our initial intrepid travelers, along with my children's childhood friends, who, remembering summer holidays 20 years ago, return for romantic weekends and weddings. Seeing them napping by the pool, or racing across the lawn, I realize the true beauty of Trasierra is that there is no ending. It's a story that never finishes.



The back of the hotel, as seen from a field of poppies in the kitchen garden.

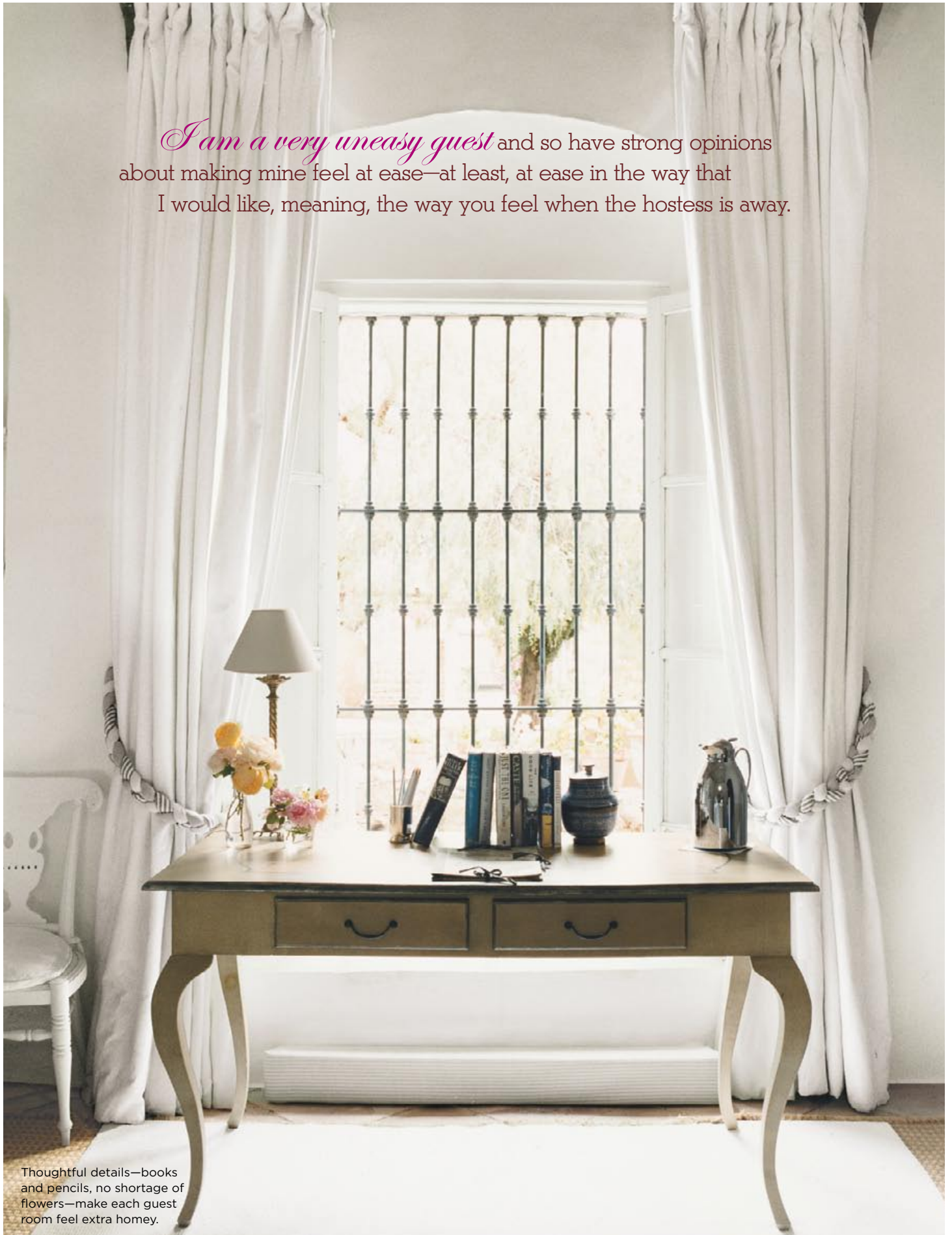
In the hotel, no two guest rooms are the same.



All the beds are dressed with a mix of linens (most made on-site) and antique pillowcases.

BEDSIDE TABLE (left) Custom pine #11 \$600, LAMP (left) Custom pine #27 \$195 and WRITING DESK (opposite page) Custom pine #6 \$1,950, all at made-in-manilva.com for information

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Thoughtful details—books and pencils, no shortage of flowers—make each guest room feel extra homey.