



BIG WIDE OPEN

GETTING HAPPILY LOST IN WEST TEXAS

Writer Suzanne Wright

Ask Texans if they've visited Big Bend and most will shake their heads. Understandable, considering their state — which is more like a country — is the biggest in the lower 48 and the second most populous.

Big Bend isn't easy to get to, which is why you'll have it pretty much to yourself when you get there. West Texas is a land apart and one of the Lone Star State's jewels.

El Paso: Your Gateway to Big Bend

Located in the western tip of Texas with the Juárez Mountains as a rugged backdrop, El Paso has an easy blend of Mexican and Southwestern cultures, more akin to Albuquerque than Dallas. The elegant Camino Real Hotel is centrally located, allowing you to walk to downtown attractions. And forget what you've heard about crime; El Paso is the safest big city in America for the fourth year in the row.

April and May have mild weather and baseball, making it a great time to visit the new stadium. Opened last April, the beautiful \$72 million Southwest University Park is home to the minor league Chihuahuas. It was money well spent, with a kids' zone, Southwest art, fresh flowers in the bathrooms and delicious, well-priced concessions, including nacho dogs and raspas, Mexican snow cones. Lawn tickets start at just five bucks.

El Paso is known as the cowboy boot capital of the world, with outlets for Lucchese, Justin and Tony Lama, among others. If money were no object, I'd commission a pair of handmade, custom boots from Rocketbuster. Housed in an old trapper's warehouse, they make boots for celebrities and will happily give you a tour. The leathers — kangaroo, anyone? — and the intricate styles — skulls, flames, peacocks, dice; even an Arizona landscape — will knock you out.

There are a clutch of great restaurants right downtown, including the upscale Anson 11, where I dined on a fine multi-course dinner that featured chilled foie gras with pickled ramps, house-cured duck, lobster ravioli, prime rib with morels and dark chocolate and sea salt ice cream.

Less formal, Tabla should not be missed. Start with the house sangria and sample your way through excellent tapas, including grilled pork skewers with piquillo peppers; garbanzo beans and carrots goosed with curry, feta and candied pistachios; and grilled squid with orange zest. If you've got room for dessert, order the churros.

Driving, Dining and Stargazing

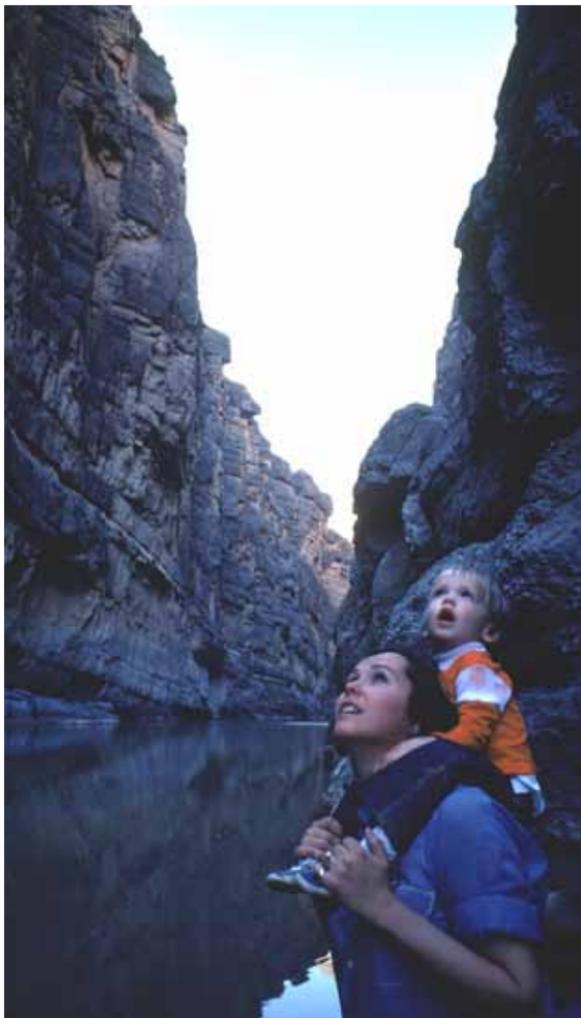
Driving west on I-10, it doesn't take long before the horizon expands and the endless blue sky meets the high plains scrub in the vast Chihuahuan Desert, the biggest desert in North America. I chased the sun and dodged tumbleweeds four feet in diameter. West Texas feels like one of the last great frontiers, scenic and silent and free of crowds. By the time I wrapped my weeklong trip, I'd put 1,300 miles on my rental car. It's great road-tripping terrain.

The small towns that dot the Texas mountain trail region are charming and offer a surprisingly sophisticated mix of cultural and historical attractions, dining, lodging and shopping. Best of all are the people themselves; Texans blend the best of Southern hospitality with western grit.

In Marathon (population, 450; elevation, 4,055 feet), the Gage Hotel offers the kind of laid-back luxury that makes a traveler feel like family. The cowboy chic furnishings are both grand and eclectic — yes, that's a taxidermy cougar — without the formality. Ask for a suite in the Los Portales wing and you'll be rewarded with a gracious room with Saltillo floors, cowhide rugs, elkhorn lamps and a stone bathroom.

The hotel's White Buffalo Bar serves a cocktail called the Brush Fire that blends vodka, orange juice, lime juice and jalapeños that will awaken your taste buds. At the 12 Gage Restaurant, I enjoyed soft shell crab tempura with fried green tomatoes, followed by chicken fried steak with cracked pepper cream gravy, a specialty. For dessert, I had champagne-soaked strawberry shortcake and a wine made from prickly pear.

Alpine is a college town, home to Sul Ross State University and the county seat. Spend an hour at the Museum of the Big Bend for an excellent introduction to the area. I checked into the quirky Maverick Inn ("a roadhouse for wanderers"), which provides earplugs for the train that rumbles by should you need them. They make great coffee and granola for breakfast. Dinner is at the Saddle Club: oysters with jack cheese and pico de gallo, prime rib sliders and a blood orange margarita to wash them down.



Marfa is now recognized worldwide as a contemporary art hub. It's also a very literate town, with the Marfa Book Company rivaling any museum's inventory of art and architecture volumes; a Museum of Modern Art in the desert. The best restaurant in town is Cochineal, and it also has a Manhattan vibe. While sipping a Hemingway daiquiri (rum, grapefruit and lime juices), I tuck into crispy fried artichoke hearts with aioli and Vietnamese-style shrimp with southern grits and a poached egg. It's a shame I was too full for the signature dish: date pudding.

Crossing the street to get to Hotel Paisano, I meet a couple of vacationing gals from Abilene. They invite me to join them in the sun-dappled courtyard, where we sip margaritas. Curious about the famed is-it-or-isn't-it phenomenon known as the Marfa lights, we decide to go check it out together.

Since the 19th century, Apaches, ranchers, meteorologists and other folks have reported accounts of red, blue and white dancing lights year-round. Many scoff that it's just

reflections from campsites and cars on the highway. Judy, Susan and I drive nine miles east to the viewing platform, arriving at 11:30 p.m. with a small group assembled. We're not sure what we saw, but this much is for sure: the stars at night are big and bright deep in the heart of Texas. We learned later that the Marfa lights are most commonly seen shortly after dark or before sunrise. It's an atmosphere thing.

It Ain't Bragging If You Can Back It Up

The award-winning movie "Boyhood" closes with the leading character in awe at Big Bend, a metaphor for the freedom that lies ahead for him as a young man. It's an apt metaphor. Big Bend National Park is the seventh largest park in the lower 48, larger than the entire state of Rhode Island, with 880,000 acres of land, river, desert and mountains. There's also Big Bend State Park, which spans an additional 350,000 acres for a total of 1.2 million acres of contiguous public land.

Both take their name from the bend of the Rio Grande,

the fluid border that divides Texas from Mexico. The Chisos Mountains Lodge, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps, offers the ideal vantage point to take in the jagged peaks. Although there are two gas stations within the park, it's the only place to stay. On the first night of my arrival, Ranger Rob is giving a very entertaining talk on the patio under the sun's fading rays.

Big Bend receives just 350,000 visitors a year compared with Yosemite, which welcomes 5 million. All that elbow room gives you more of a chance to view wildlife, including the most reptiles, birds, bats and butterflies catalogued in any national park. Rob is taking questions when an employee comes out from the lodge to whisper in his ear. Turns out, there's a baby black bear in one of the trees near the restaurant. Brandishing cell phone cameras, we file out to take a look. This photogenic bear proves very popular on Facebook.

It's a bit chilly at 5,400 feet in elevation, so I grab a fleece and take the short path to "the Window." Stars glitter overhead and a sliver of silvery moon illuminates a distant butte. Later in the night I awaken, step outside and look up. The Milky Way dazzles on a clear, soundless night.

Tackling a park of this magnitude is no easy feat. I want to make the most of my stay, so I've enlisted Big Don of Big Bend Overland Tours for a tour. With Don doing the driving and peppering me with historical facts, I'm free to ogle the splendid scenery. Much of the flora and fauna is familiar from our Sonoran Desert, though the key indicator plant here is the stinky lechuguilla, not the saguaro. Toxic to sheep and cattle, the mineral and salt-rich agave is a staple of the javelina's diet. South of the border, a sports drink is made from it.

We stop at 100-year-old settlement ruins on the way to the park's highlight, Santa Elena Canyon. Here, the Rio Grande ("Rio Trickle" during drought) is trapped beneath walls that soar to 1,500 feet. We hike in to appreciate the scale, then wind our way on rutted roads to the historic Castolon Store for a light lunch.

The following day, I head out of the park to the ghost town of Terlingua to join guide Billy Miller of Far Flung Outdoor Center for a half-day canoe trip, putting in at the state park. The water level is low, so there's some portage involved, but it's still a fine way to pass time in this remote and beautiful borderland.

Terlingua was once a mining town, but now it's most famed for "porch sittin'" at the Starlight Theatre. Buy a six-pack, grab a seat, watch the sun set and make some new friends while enjoying live music and good food. It's the perfect way to cap a West Texas experience.

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