

Kayaking the Rio Grande, which forms the southern edge of Big Bend National Park and a significant stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border. The Big Bend region of West Texas is known as one of the country's wildest, most forbidding places. But for MARCIA DESANCTIS, its big skies, open deserts, and Lone Star hospitality offered just the kind of space she needed.

### PHOTOGRAPHS BY DESIREE ESPADA



S O E A 9 E R W A S H





to grasp the essence of Big Bend that, on my first morning, I jumped in a little too quickly. Driving down from Marathon, Texas, 69 miles north, I aimed straight for the heart of the national park: the Chisos Basin, a geological depression encircled by a mountain range of the same name. A friend had recommended the six-mile Window Trail hike; I reached the trailhead at high noon, disregarding the posted warnings not to hike after 10 a.m. because of the extreme heat. Blithely, I ventured into a dry canyon bed, past a surge of volcanic outcrops and clusters of violet cenizos and bright desert asters.

Fifteen minutes in, I encountered what seemed to be a remarkable painted stick bisecting my path. It turned out to be a deadly Mojave rattlesnake that, thankfully, ignored me. By the time I reached the Window—a natural stone aperture at the lip of a 220-foot cliff, through which I could see the pastel expanse of the Chihuahuan Desert—it was 101 degrees, there was no other hiker in sight, and my backup water bottle was emptying fast. I proceeded cautiously on the way back, ducking for shade wherever I could on the arduous uphill route. By the time I arrived at my air-conditioned car, safe but dusty and dehydrated, I had learned my lesson. Big Bend was different. One needs humility, stamina, a little courage... and probably not to hike alone.



"EVERY OTHER ASPECT of the Big Bend Country—landscape, configuration, rocks, and vegetation—is weird and strange and of a type unfamiliar to the inhabitants of civilized lands," wrote the geologist Robert T. Hill, who mapped the Rio Grande for the U.S. government in 1899. One hundred eighteen of its 1,885 miles, including the elbow-like curve that gives Big Bend its name, delineate the southern edge of the park—and the international boundary with Mexico. Hill's words remain true today. "For the most part, people don't realize how hot it is, how isolated and vast," said Greg Henington, owner of Far Flung Outdoor Center, the camp and tour operator that organized my visit. "All the things we're accustomed to in other national parks just don't exist here." Henington has been arranging trips since 1986 and has few peers in matters related to Big Bend. The park has no shuttle buses, and you won't encounter many easygoing rangers pointing directions or offering reassurance. It is also on the edge of .

Clockwise from above: A "Texas Old-Fashioned" and a prickly-pear margarita at the Gage Hotel, in Marathon; Far Flung Outdoor *Center guide* Randy De La *Fuente leads the* way; the sun rises over Willow House, a new hotel in Terlingua; rocking chairs on the porch at the Gage.



nowhere: the nearest airport is more than 3½ hours away in Midland. There is still something vaguely renegade about the place—and this promise of adventure and seclusion is precisely why its allure is on the rise. "This is the last frontier in the Lower 48," Henington said. "And right now, everyone seems to be looking for that." One notable side effect of the

pandemic is the record number of travelers discovering what has, historically, been one of the least visited national parks in the United

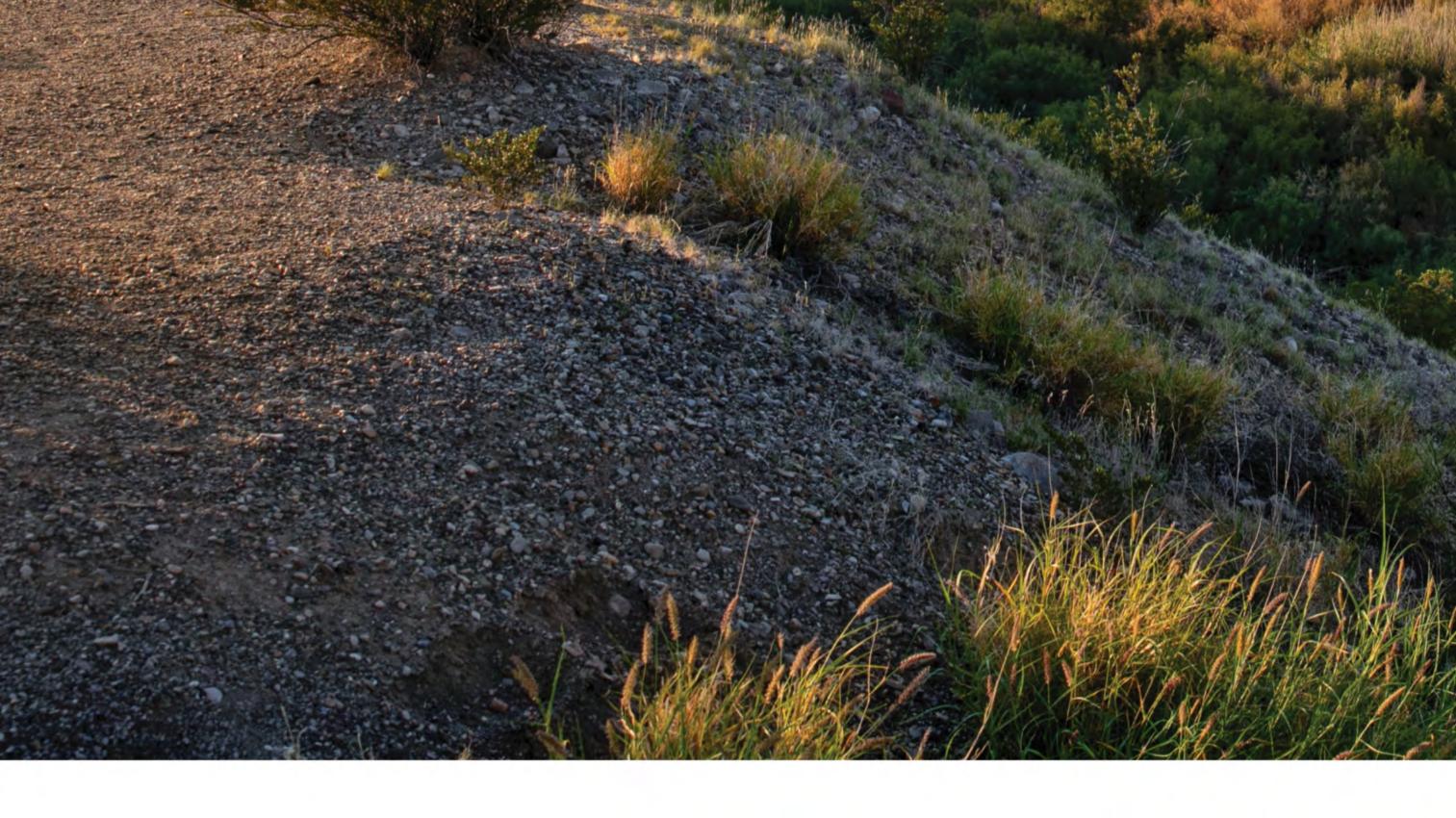


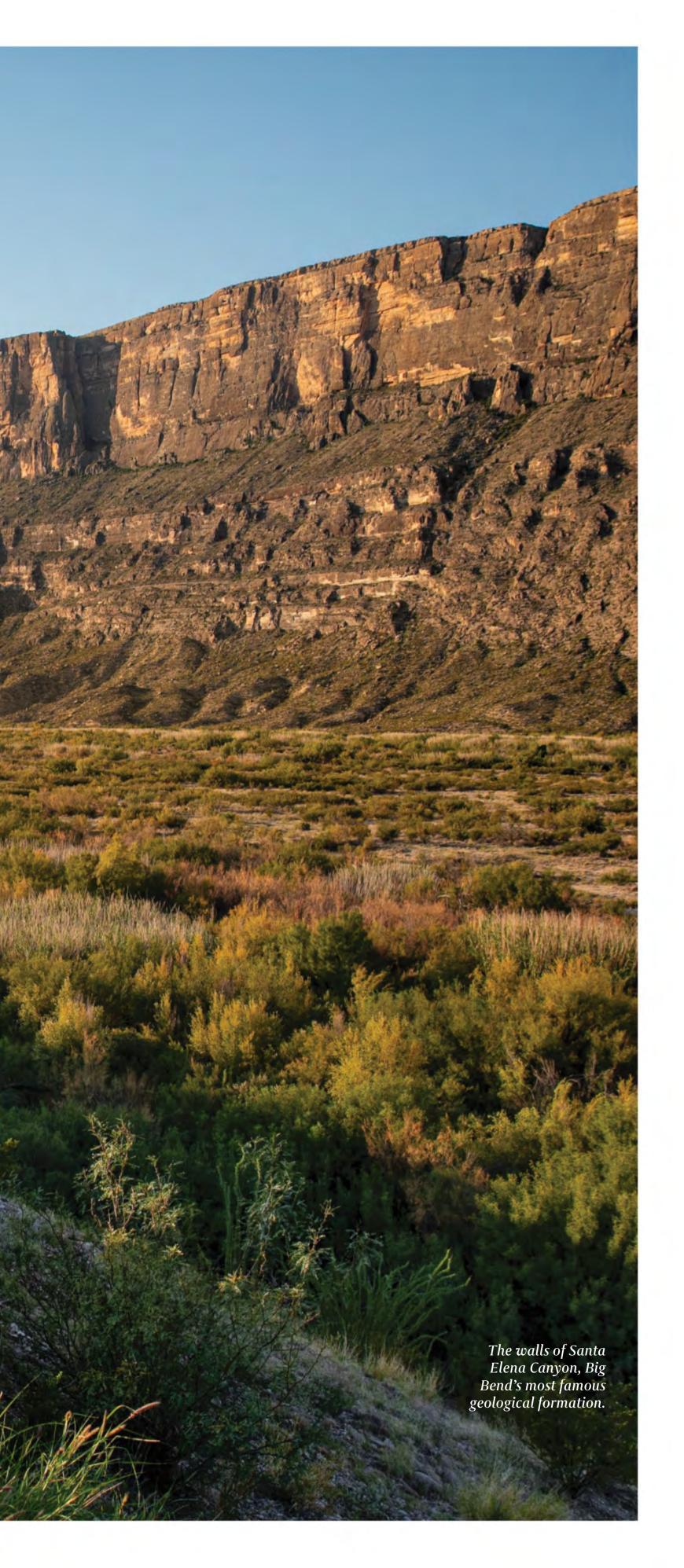
States. They are drawn to Big Bend's open vistas, astonishing stillness, and "those intangible things that are disappearing elsewhere," explained Tom VandenBerg, who oversees, among other things, education and outreach for the park. We met up at a picnic table outside his headquarters. He too told me that travelers are longing for escape—preferably somewhere they can get to by car. And right now, the emptiest places on earth can also feel the safest.

When the virus appeared to be letting up toward the end of last summer, Big Bend was reopening after its second COVID-related shutdown, just in time for the October-December high seasonand its campgrounds were already fully booked. I was one of those people carefully seeking refuge in the great wide open. Every summer of my childhood, my family flew from our home in Boston to my father's native Tucson, Arizona, and, in a rented station wagon, rode north and west to parks like Grand Canyon and Yellowstone. But we never made it to Big Bend, so last fall, I set out to finally see it.

While remoteness is Big Bend's greatest virtue, it also means that the nearest hospital, not to mention pharmacy, is more than 70 miles away in Alpine, a tiny regional medical center with just four ICU beds. In November, there was a spike in cases of COVID-19 in the Big Bend region-a three-county area that covers more than 12,000 square miles of southwestern Texas and includes a university and the cultural hub of Marfa. It was a reminder that, as travelers, we have a responsibility to wear masks and socially distance if we choose to travel during the pandemic, even to the most secluded places. As Henington put it, "Being outdoors doesn't mean that you can just do whatever you want."

MY MOTHER WAS not big on roughing it during our summer national park trips. She believed that nature is best THE LAND BEFORE ME CONTAINED NOTHING AND EVERYTHING, AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING VASTNESS OF MOUNTAIN, DESERT, AND, MOST DAZZLING OF ALL, SKY.





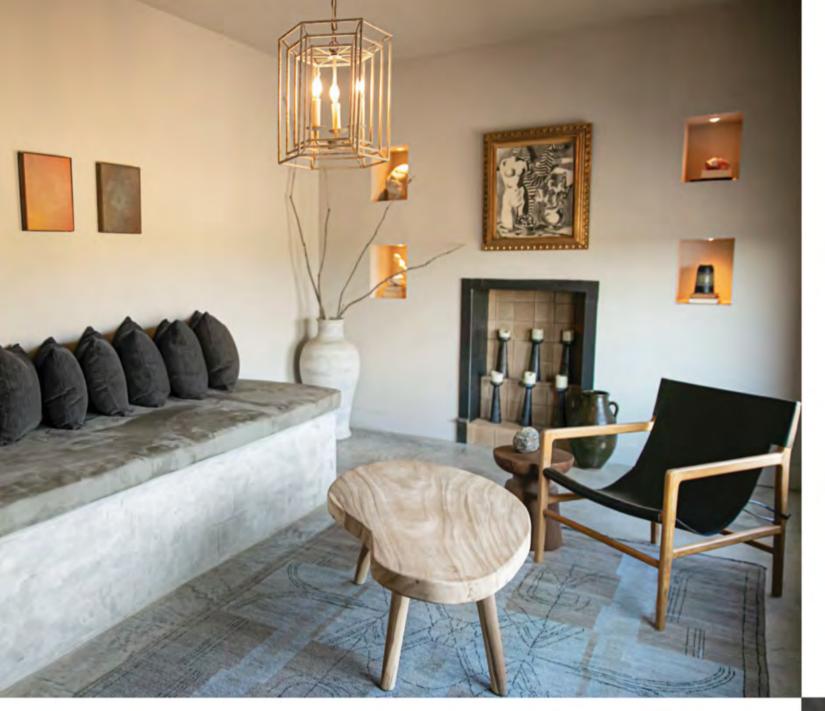
enjoyed, whenever possible, after waking up in a spanking hotel room rather than a cold-water campground. It is one of many preferences I inherited from her. Luckily for me, today an immersive experience in the wilds of Big Bend does not exclude comfort.

The morning before my ill-advised solo hike, I awoke to the nostalgic sound of railroad cars trundling east past the Gage Hotel on the main street of Marathon, the northern gateway to Big Bend. I brewed a cup of coffee, then ambled the town's small grid in predawn darkness, propelled by a sense of solitude and freedom. Though the temperature would soon soar into the 90s, I still needed to wrap myself in a woolly shawl.

With one of the lowest light pollution levels on earth, the Big Bend region has the rarest of dark night skies—which is to say not dark at all, but shining white with bright planets and umpteen constellations. From the middle of the street, I watched the eastern horizon turn from starry black to flaming orange to powder blue.

The Gage is what revived Marathon, a former cattle-trading hub that had seen better days. In 1978, Houston oilman J. P. Bryan set his eye on the Parkway, a run-down but culturally significant 20-room hotel built in 1927. The owner wanted \$30,000 for it, and when Bryan jokingly questioned the steal of a price, the man riposted, "I could go down a little." Bryan laughs when he relates the story, because today he owns an architectural masterpiece, a bona fide chunk of Texas history, and a first-class hotel all in one. He also owns much of Marathon–26 meticulously restored historic buildings and counting, including the former Ritchey Brothers general store, now the hotel's fitness center. I was riveted by the mounted animal trophies around the hotel and the weathered set of chaps and vintage equipale chair that graced my room. But the Gage manages to avoid cowboy kitsch, instead staying firmly in the realm of hacienda chic. In one of the common rooms, I found a mastodon femur uncovered at Bryan's nearby ranch. I brushed my fingers along it, the surface smooth as marble. At the Gage, I was glimpsing a bygone era on the western frontier, updated with modern essentials like an elegant pool, a craft brewery, and breakfast tacos at the hotel coffee bar. What began as a by-the-blueprint hotel restoration has effectively rescued Marathon, which most travelers will pass through on their way to Big Bend. Bryan hopes that his passion for reviving a slice of Texas heritage will inspire others to take

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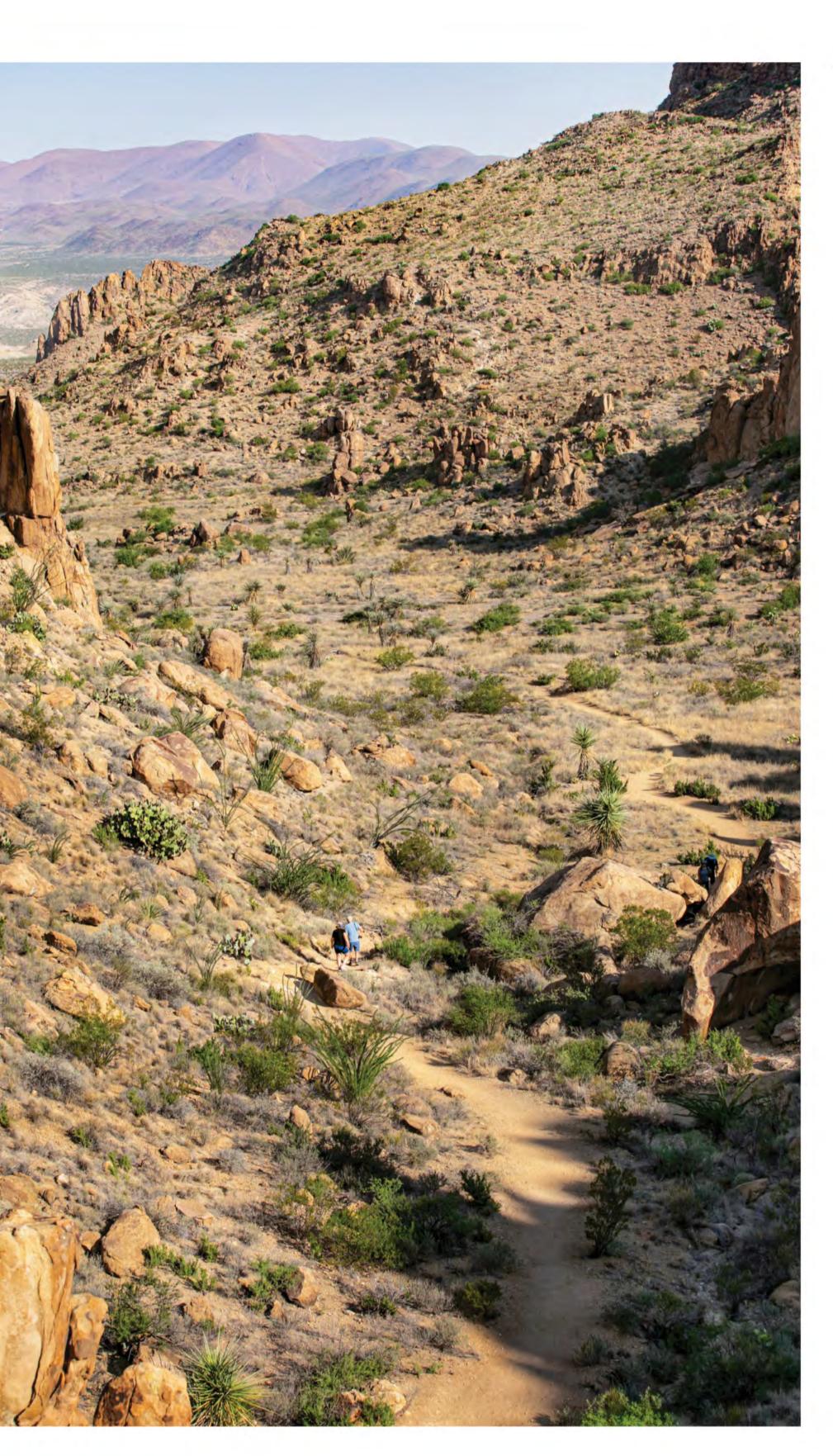


killed, or forced onto reservations the Mescalero Apache and other groups that had established themselves in the southern part of the state.

Later, the population expanded with ranchers and mining operations that extracted mercury from cinnabar ore, until support swelled in Texas to deed this massive spread of landdubbed by the Spanish conquistadors El Despoblado, or "the uninhabited place"-to the National Park Service. In 1944, Big (Continued on page 102)

ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY





Hiking the Grapevine Hills Trail, known for its distinctive towers and rock formations. Opposite, from top: The living room of one of the casitas at Willow House; Willow House founder Lauren Werner.

# In & Around Big Bend

## **Getting There**

Big Bend is one of the most remote places in the U.S.— El Paso, the closest major city, is 300 miles to the northwest—so be prepared to do a lot of driving. You can fly in to Midland, more than 3½ hours from the national park by car, via Dallas. San Antonio and Austin are both about a seven-hour drive away. For more park information, visit nps.gov/bibe.

## Where to Stay

#### **Cibolo Creek Ranch**

A 2½-hour drive west of Big Bend, between Terlingua and Marfa, this luxury resort compound comprises three historic forts on 30,000 acres of wilderness. *cibolocreekranch.com; doubles from \$550.* 

#### Gage Hotel

In Marathon, the northern gateway to Big Bend, this historic building is now a 45-key hotel filled with stylish Texicana and antiques. gagehotel.com; doubles from \$185.

#### **Willow House**

Stay in one of 12 striking concrete casitas near Terlingua, which are surrounded by more than 250 private acres of desert. *willowhouse.co; doubles from \$315, two-night minimum.* 

#### How to Book

#### Far Flung Outdoor Center

A Big Bend institution, Far Flung has been outfitting park visitors with guides, gear, and route ideas for decades. There are also casitas at Far Flung HQ for those who want to use it as a home base. *bigbend farflung.com*.



(Big Bend, continued from page 98)

Bend was designated the country's 28th national park, and today it covers more than 800,000 acres.

I was overwhelmed by Big Bend's scale, the geological diversity, and the seemingly endless stretches of wilderness. It's the only national park with an entire mountain range, the Chisos, within its borders, and there are canyons of limestone and smooth volcanic ash, craggy trails, abandoned ranches, and hot springs—all located within the Chihuahuan Desert. Anchoring it all is the Rio Grande.

After spending the night in one of Far Flung's spotless casitas, I set off from the company office in the town of Terlingua, just to the west of the park, for my first encounter with the river that has, thanks in part to John Ford movies, formed our idea of the American Southwest. Big Bend's rainy season had been relatively dry that year, and the Rio Grande's water level was unusually low; river trips were launching from the 311,000acre Big Bend Ranch State Park, next door to the national park, where it was still possible to kayak. COVID precautions mandated that Far Flung guide Randy De La Fuente and I took separate cars to the launch site. I traveled west on Highway 170. To my left, the river gurgled as it flowed toward Santa Elena Canyon. Mesas loomed, as did whitish hoodoos, looking like they had been honed by giant sheets of sandpaper. I almost instantly got a soaking, though not quite a dunking, on the first of several sets of rapids we encountered on our six-mile trip

along the waterline between the U.S. and Mexico. We floated through the opposing cliff faces of Penasco Canyon and then, to our right on the Mexican side, passed grazing herds of jet-black cattle. Dense walls of river cane flanked both banks, but I had other walls on my mind as we paddled through these fabled borderlands, absorbing the region's palpable mystique. "We always say that the border is a gray area here, and not much more than a water barrier," Henington had told me.

Many Mexican citizens work in the Big Bend region, crossing back and forth with relative ease, and in normal, non-COVID times, travelers can visit the town of Boquillas, just across the border. Most locals I spoke with derided then-president Trump's hypothetical wall-if it were even possible to engineer such a structure in this fluid landscape—for reasons humanitarian and otherwise. A wall would have interrupted the movements of animals such as Mexican black bears, cutting them off from their water source and migration patterns. Because the terrain is hostile on both sides, fewer people tend to seek asylum in Big Bend than elsewhere in Texas. But nevertheless, migrants attempting to cross are regularly discovered by border patrol agents, and the human tragedies that can befall those who attempt to navigate this unforgiving desert are woefully common.

describe freedom, it would be how I feel here," she told me when I checked in to Willow House, her stunning hotel just off Terlingua's main thoroughfare. We chatted outdoors at a massive concrete table, looking east across a sea of ocotillo towards the warm glow of the Chisos ridgeline. We watched her rustcolored Irish setter mix, Waters, dart for a ball among the shrubs, while the sun continued its dance across the desert. (In February, this view was, briefly, draped with a rare four inches of snow-but the region would be spared the worst effects of Texas's catastrophic storms.)

Five years ago, Werner, a California native recently out of college, took a solo trip to Big Bend and was immediately stirred by the area's "heavy, heavy energy." Though she worked in commercial real estate in skyscraper-studded Dallas, Werner began to imagine a career building idyllic spaces that captured the beauty of Texas and offered guests a way to immerse themselves in nature. But she was not one for camping-and noticed Big Bend's dearth of highcomfort places to stay. Soon, an idea for a luxurious but low-key hotel began to take shape. "I thought there had to be more people like me who would value a place like that," she mused. "So why don't I just start looking for land?" She broke ground on 287 acres, and in September 2019, Willow House opened its doors. The property's 12 casitas are boxlike concrete structures, warm and earthy and velvety gray, each one blending into the landscape. From the patios, guests get an ever-transforming view of the Chisos Mountains. For the next three days, I would set off from Willow House at dawn to delve into some of Big Bend's most picturesque corners. Fortunately, De La Fuente came with me, administering folklore and botany lessons, Texas-flavored bon mots and the occasional gentle admonishment, mostly about hydration. Never again would I set off on a hike without

BIG BEND'S LOCATION at the juncture of the U.S. and Mexico is a major thread in its complex history. Another is Terlingua, which became my base: a town with its own mythical story. In 1903, the economy was flourishing thanks to the lucrative cinnabar mining industry, but a few decades later, with demand for mercury sagging, it faltered. The industry left in its wake an abandoned town that, in the ensuing century, has attracted drifters, dreamers, and visionaries.

One of those visionaries is Lauren Werner. "If someone asked me to enough water to fill a punch bowl.

"I do believe there is a bead of sweat above my eye," he deadpanned from the Lost Mine Trail near the Chisos Basin, a 45-minute drive from Terlingua. The five-mile hike is known for its panoramas, which shift bafflingly at every switchback. As we ascended, landmarks came abruptly into view. "There's my sweetheart," he exclaimed, gesturing toward Casa Grande, a statuesque volcanic ridge. He pointed out a lechuguilla, a spiny desert succulent with sap that is a natural antibiotic, and showed me the scaly bark of the alligator junipers. Around us drifted aromas of creosote bush, ponderosa pine, and Douglas fir. Around another bend was Juniper Canyon and a lone, craggy rock formation that reminded me of a ruined Scottish castle.

Later, as I drank an icy Pacifico on the porch of my casita, the dry air blew over me like a soothing balm. Sizing up a kind of silence and darkness I'd never experienced before, I felt as if a spark had reignited something that had been extinguished during those first dark months of the pandemic. Trail by strenuous trail, vista by staggering vista—even masked at all times, even in brutally harsh heat—Big Bend was inciting me to something verging on euphoria. studded with boulders that sparkled with quartz. We hardly saw another person. I stopped to admire tiny ripe persimmons and the dried stalks of the sotol plant, a relative of agave. Motoring south on Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive, the 30-mile paved road that cuts through the western side of the park, we passed a series of mighty geological formations—Mule Ears, Burro Mesa—as we headed toward Santa Elena Canyon.

This is Big Bend's marquee attraction, made famous by an Ansel Adams photograph that shows the fearsome symmetry of the limestone gorge. From a distance, its walls blazed fiery red in the afternoon sun. "A hundred million years ago," explained De La Fuente, "this was all under the sea." I lost my footing several times on the loose trail that skirted the water, winding past walls chock-full of fossilized marine mollusks. After our hike, bone weary, we made lunch in the Jeep. As I crunched a peanut butter and Fritos sandwich, I realized I would scarcely be more content if I were eating magret de canard at Septime in Paris.

Shellacked with fine dust, I was pleased to shower it off at Willow House, though careful not to squander water—the hotel's, and the whole area's, most elusive resource. Feeling restored, I drove back into Terlingua and turned in to the former mining neighborhood still known, somewhat nostalgically, as Terlingua Ghost Town. The place is the work of Bill Ivey, a local man whose desire to preserve Terlingua was so strong that he bought the ghost town in its entirety in 1987 and restored it to cinematic perfection. I wandered the weathered cemetery and the cluster of original structures; in the Terlingua Trading Co., I perused the terrific book section as Willie Nelson's "Crazy" played on the sound system. I peeked into St. Agnes Church, which was bare-bones, but it moved me nonetheless, as these mysterious reliquaries of faith always do.

"I've often said that Terlingua is the true spirit of the Big Bend," Ivey told me over chicken-fried antelope steak and margaritas at the Starlight Theatre Restaurant & Saloon. Ivey grew up in nearby Lajitas, where his father owned the trading post on the banks of the Rio Grande, and he remarked on the many changes that have happened in his lifetime. Amazon and Wi-Fi ease the running of his businesses, which include the restaurant, a store, and two hotels, and the laid-back mood and lure of the park mean more urban refugees are planting roots.

His words came back to me the next morning as I waited in the quiet, enjoying the last of the night's crisp, cool air. I had driven to one of Ivey's favorite spots for sunrise, the Indian Head Trail, which is remarkable for the millennia-old petroglyphs carved into volcanic boulders along the path. Though excavations continue in the region, only an estimated 10 percent of the park has been surveyed for archaeological sites. At Indian Head, the pictographs of animal, human, and nature symbols are a reminder of the hands that created them, the ancient people who looked east and saw precisely what I did that morning. Above me were the fleck of a waning moon, Mars, Saturn, the Milky Way, the heavens and all they hold. Then the night was swept away in a swift flash, giving way as it always does to the soft colors of the desert: patient, enduring, eternal. +

THE NEXT MORNING, I hopped in the open back of a Jeep, and De La Fuente drove into the park from Terlingua as day broke. I got the sensation of being in a massive bowl surrounded by the ridgeline, which was still a shadow against the heavens. I had yet to see a cloud in Big Bend, but with its everchanging palette, the sky was filled with personality.

We turned on a dirt road to hike Grapevine Hills, a desert wash

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