



The luxury teepee tents at Marfa's El Cosmico are one of the quickest ways to crash in the tiny town.

FOUR-DAY WEEKEND

West Texas Swing

The creative oasis of Marfa is no secret, but there's plenty more to do in the Texas desert. And the best way to experience it is with a road trip through the heart of the region. **by TARAJIA MORRELL**

MARFA, THAT MODISH art colony in the desert, has reached zeitgeist status as a must-visit destination for hipsters and art lovers looking for an extra dose of inspiration. But there's much more to do in West Texas than get in touch with your inner artist. For the intrepid nature lover, there's Big Bend National Park and its ancient limestone canyons. For the cosmically inclined, there's the impossibly dark night sky. And for those who just want to take in the stark landscape from the front seat of a car, the towns of Alpine, Marathon, and Bal-

morhea form a constellation of sorts, with highways between that capture the spirit of the desert—as you fly by at 80 miles per hour. “Where we are in Texas is very particular,” says Rocky Barnette, owner of the Capri, one of Marfa's best restaurants. “We call it Northern Occupied Mexico because we are on the north end of the Chihuahuan Desert, and it's more like Mexico than the rest of Texas.”

WHEN TO GO: The weather is best in winter—cool and dry. The only time to avoid is summer.
WHERE TO FLY INTO: El Paso is closest, at three hours. Dallas is cheaper but a six-hour haul.

And that's the thing about West Texas: At its heart, it's a crossroads—of landscapes, of adventures, of fast-fading relics of America past. Its charm lies in extremities: harsh, arid landscapes amid lush pockets of desert shrubs. Intense sun-



light that turns rosy and soft before it melts away into winter nights. Great expanses of sand and rock, canyon and crag, that are home to jackrabbits, coyotes, and bears. It's one of the last places where you can go deep and go wide, and, if you do, you can expect to find West Texas' pink dust on your mind—and in your pockets—for a long time to come.

NICK SIMONITE

DAYS 1 & 2

MARFA

Driving to Marfa can take the better part of an afternoon from El Paso, the closest airport, some 200 miles away. When you hit the town of Van Horn and quit I-10 for Route 90, you'll have the distinct and liberating sense that you're leaving civilization. "The desolation is something to behold," says Shawn Adams, owner of the barbecue joint **Marfa Meat Company**. "Besides Alaska, it's really one of the last American frontiers." In the tumbleweed town of Valentine, you'll pass **Prada Marfa**, the faux shop that's actually a permanent art installation. A half-hour farther south is Marfa proper, which first gained attention when seminal artist Donald Judd began to buy property and produce work there in the early 1970s. Since the 2000s, when a new generation of artistic outliers began to take over the century-old adobe buildings that line the main street, the town has undergone a slow but steady renaissance. "We'd lived in a lot of places before here, but when we found Marfa, we just felt like we had the space to create," says Gabrielle Gamarello, co-



▶ Another hipster posing in front of Marfa's old Food Shark food truck.

MARFA MUSTS

WHERE TO STAY

Each of the 24 rooms at the 1950s-era motel **THUNDERBIRD**, which was updated in 2004 into a modish neon-lit hotel (complete with a courtyard that feels like a

desert-themed conservatory] has curated LP collections and record players. But for glorious kitsch, opt for the luxe tepee camp **EL COSMICO**, situated on 21 acres outside of town.

WHERE TO GET INSPIRED

Requisite stops on the culture tour are the **JUDD FOUNDATION**, the main studio of the man who made Marfa an art destination; **BALLROOM MARFA**, a contemporary arts

space in an old dance hall; and the **AYN FOUNDATION**, which houses the permanent exhibit of Andy Warhol's *Last Supper*. For author readings and other high-minded events, head to **MARFA BOOK COMPANY**.

owner of **Mano Mercantile**, a design shop in town.

Many of the town's permanent residents start their mornings at **Do Your Thing** coffee shop, with espresso, avocado toast, and people watching. You should do the same, and once you've had your caffeine fix, head out on foot to absorb the pastel shades and contours of the town's structures, and visit funky shops like **Cobra Rock** and **Mano Mercantile**. When the sun gets low in the west, head to the **Capri** for chef Barnette's pre-Columbian cuisine, with dishes like watermelon radish salad and turkey mole. After dinner, try for a viewing of the Marfa lights: mysterious floating balls of luminous color visible east of town that may be reflections of distant headlights but can seem otherworldly in the desert. Or head to the mangy but irresistible **Lost Horse Saloon** for one last Ranch Water: tequila, lime, and mineral water.



▶ The steak at the Capri restaurant

FROM TOP: JOE KATHIRIA/DOCKATHIRIA; JESSICA SAMPLE



The Valentine's
Day party at Big
Bend Brewing

DAY 3

BALMORHEA,
ALPINE,
MARATHON

Depart Marfa by heading north through former military town Fort Davis to **Balmorhea State Park**, where the Civilian Conservation Corps built the world's largest spring-fed pool during the Great Depression. The park has modest rooms to rent and places to camp, but it's the year-round-73-degree water in the Beaux Arts-style basin that makes Balmorhea worth a stop—and a dip—particularly since oil and gas development may destroy the park and pool in the near future. Take advantage while you can. Loop back south through Alpine

and check out **Cheshire Cat Antiques**, which has vintage Hudson's Bay and Navajo blankets, Native American silver jewelry, and other southwestern treasures. From there, head to **Big Bend Brewing Co.**, perhaps the most remote brewery in the United States, to sip its locally made beers. In that same craft spirit, but dating to 1905, is **Big Bend Saddlery**, a dream emporium for custom-tooled leather—everything from photo albums to cellphone belt clips, as well as cowboy bedrolls and, of course, saddles. Spend the night in southwestern luxury at the **Gage Hotel**, in the town of Marathon, the gateway to 800,000-acre **Big Bend National Park**. The hotel has a ranching motif, complete with cowhides as rugs and a restaurant that serves elk-and-buffalo meatloaf and stuffed quail.

WORTH
THE
STOP

VALENTINE'S BIG DAY

If you're in West Texas in February, **BIG BEND BREWING CO.** throws a Valentine's Day fiesta in Valentine, in which cowboys line dance and local bands croon country and

Latino folk tunes at a restored 1907 mercantile building.

"The Valentine's Day party is like being in Austin in the 1970s," says Big Bend founder Matt Kruger. "It's the best party of the year."

MAKING THE MOST
OF THE NIGHT SKIES

Forty-five miles north of Marfa is the **MCDONALD OBSERVATORY**, home to the third-largest telescope in the world. In addition to

educational exhibits on-site, it hosts regular "star parties," during which experts set up telescopes trained on specific objects in our solar system and talk you through what in the galaxy you're looking at.

DAY 4

BIG BEND
NATIONAL
PARK

Nowhere is the West Texas landscape more spectacular than in Big Bend National Park, where the **Rio Grande** slices through canyons and marks the border of the United States and Mexico. "It allows you the space to find yourself—the space and the solitude to discover what's important," says Shawn Adams, of Marfa Meat Company, who makes regular forays into the park. In addition to soul searching, there's also kayaking, hiking, camping, fishing, bird-watching, and stargazing. If you want to extend the trip, do it here with a paddle down the Rio Grande. Otherwise, head back to civilization through the former mining town of Terlingua (population 58) to the **Chinati Hot Springs**, where you can soak away sore hiking or camping muscles. Once owned by Donald Judd, the Chinati Springs are modest but pleasantly tranquil, and are another place from which to explore the desert on foot or bike. Once the dust is washed off in the springs, it's a five-hour haul back to El Paso and your flight home.



Paddling the
Rio Grande in Big Bend
National Park