



# Men's Journal

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Forgotten Texas – Big Bend National Park

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NOTEBOOK

## Forgotten Texas

Vast and remote, Big Bend National Park offers otherworldly landscapes, spectacular vistas, and near-complete solitude.

by JULIA HOLMES

**C**ROUCHED BESIDE the flame of my camp stove, alien-looking mountain crags in the distance, and a strange insect picking its way across the martian desert at my feet, I start to feel like the lone survivor of a doomed space mission, my ship abandoned somewhere over the ridge. Not quite another planet, but almost as good: I'm deep in West Texas, in Big Bend National Park, one of the most eccentric and stunning wild places in the country. Situated along a remote stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border (the nearest airport is almost 250 miles away), it's been called America's forgotten park: as big as Yosemite, with less than a tenth of its visitors. Even in April, the end of high season, you can feel like you have its 1,252 square miles to yourself.

TRAVEL

To reach most of the park, you'll need a four-wheel-drive, high-clearance vehicle: Much of the 150 miles of unpaved road is narrow, rocky, and fringed with razor-sharp lechuguilla and cactus, and can be washed out by flash floods. Big Bend is immense and wildly diverse, with cool mountain highlands, desert canyons, and lush river valleys.

It's impossible to experience it all in one visit, but that's all right — you'll definitely want to come back.

Some people head straight into the mountains (the Chisos are the only range entirely contained within a national park). Rising out of the desert, they're a biological island, rich with wildflowers, pine forests, and hidden waterfalls, and home to the park's rebounding bear population. From Chisos Basin, you can set off on short hikes

with hugely rewarding views (Lost Mine Trail, Window Trail), start the climb toward 7,825-foot Emory Peak, or head out for a few days of backpacking around the outer rim. If

From left: Departing Chisos Basin; a Marfa trailer; the Rio Grande hot springs

you're looking for a less rugged retreat, get on the waiting list for one of the adobe cottages here, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

Depending on river levels, you can also explore the park by raft or kayak, drifting down the Rio Grande through towering canyons, shooting the occasional Class IV rapids, and camping along the sandy bank, all with Mexico just a stone's throw away.

I'd made the eight-hour drive from Austin, much of it down empty, hypnotically straight roads, past dusty ranches and oil fields — a landscape that's lent its way-off-the-grid credibility to movies like *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood*. My plan was to make my way across the park over five days, from the eastern desert basin, through the Chisos, and down to the Santa Elena Canyon in the west.

Big Bend is a perfect place to find solitude — night after night, I scan the 360-degree

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MATT KENNEDY; FREDRIK BRODIN; ERIC SCHUELLER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

