

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Life | Travel | Off Duty Travel

By Kathryn O'Shea-Evans | April 4, 2017

A Desert Escape to a Renowned Texas Town

Marfa, the small West Texas town, is known for its ties to minimalist artist Donald Judd's work, but its most masterful attractions are nature-made



A walking trail in Mimms Unit, an 11,000-acre rangeland a few blocks north of downtown Marfa. *Max Burkhalter for The Wall Street Journal*

IF YOU CALLED Marfa “Nowheresville,” you’d be right, to a degree. The town of fewer than 2,000 people in far west Texas has one stoplight, erratic cell service, and shop and restaurant hours that are even spottier. But for every sense in which Marfa falls short, it triumphs in another: cinematic landscapes that stretch unbroken to the horizon; cowboys presiding over art galleries; and sunsets that, at the smog-free altitude of nearly 5,000 feet, were the prettiest I’d ever seen.

People who know Marfa know it as an art hub, thanks largely to the late minimalist artist Donald Judd, who fled New York in the 1970s to set up creative camp in the Chihuahuan high-desert. It’s now home to his Chinati Foundation, a contemporary art compound where we saw a roadrunner darting around Judd’s aluminum sculptures in a former artillery shed. Judd kicked off a movement: Today, 23 art galleries operate in downtown Marfa, so many that one beleaguered bungalow had a sign that read “This is NOT an art gallery, THANKS.” A Prada store, an elaborate art installation designed by Berlin-based artists Elmgreen & Dragset (and Instagrammed by Beyoncé in 2014, then legions of her followers), sits about 30 minutes outside of town, surrounded by idling jack rabbits.

But my husband, James, and I weren't looking to take in the art scene when we made the trek from New York in June; we've got plenty of art in our backyard. No, we went with three goals: to see Big Bend National Park, to attend a star viewing at the McDonald Observatory—so remote it sits below some of the darkest night skies in the country—and to soak up old Hollywood history at Hotel Paisano, where Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean and Rock Hudson stayed during the filming of 1956's "Giant."



Hotel Paisano, where Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean stayed while filming 1956's "Giant."
MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Hotel Paisano, built in 1930, has 41 rooms, many with private patios and fireplaces. *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



The 1930s Hotel Paisano.
PHOTO: MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



A cheese and charcuterie platter at the Capri in downtown Marfa. *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Mimms Unit, where trailside signs explain the desert ecosystem, promotes healthy watersheds. *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

When we pulled up to the Paisano our first night in town, rain broke out in whipping sheets, then biblical hail. That night at sunset, as James stretched out from driving, I walked outside and watched lightning jackknife across the wide sky, and could see why location scouts are drawn here. “No Country for Old Men” filmed scenes in Marfa, “There Will be Blood,” too. In the Paisano, large-scale photos of the “Giant” stars roughhousing on set fill the open-beam lobby; you can book the cast’s exact rooms (Liz stayed in No. 212, James in 223, Rock in 211).



The Capri, one of Marfa’s trendiest spots, serves pisco sours and fire-grilled rib-eye. *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



A handful of guest rooms at Cibolo Creek Ranch, a dude ranch and resort 40 miles outside of town, are housed in a fort built around 1857. *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ...*

The next day, we ignored the cars making a beeline for Judd’s installations and walked a few blocks north of the hotel to Mimms Unit, an 11,000-acre rangeland with trailside signs that explain the desert ecosystem. We went on the suggestion of photographer Douglas Friedman, who divides his time

between New York, Los Angeles and Marfa. For over an hour, walking through rolling grasslands, we didn't see another soul. "I came to Marfa for the first time three years ago to see the art, but I ended up seduced by the sky and the landscape," Mr. Friedman later told me. "When you're there, you're content to just kind of be."

And yet there is plenty to do beyond just exist. Mr. Friedman's favorite things: diving into the cool pools at Chinati Hot Springs—once owned by Judd—and soaring some 2,000 feet above the landscape in a two-seat sailplane with Marfa Gliders. Nearby resorts, including Cibolo Creek Ranch, where Justice Antonin Scalia died last year, offer horseback riding and birding excursions.



The dry-aged rib-eye steak at the Capri. *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Santa Elena Canyon in Big Bend National Park. *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



Santa Elena Canyon in Big Bend National Park PHOTO: *MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The next morning we left at daybreak to drive about two hours to Big Bend National Park, which shares 118 miles of border with Mexico and was, as the front desk clerk at the Paisano told me, “hot as a firecracker.” Big Bend sits on the Rio Grande and accommodates the most diverse population of birds and butterflies found in any of our national parks, plus mountain lions and javelinas. People are relatively scarce. The annual visitor count for the 1,252-square-mile park maxed out at 388,290 in 2016, less than half of Yellowstone’s head count in July alone.

Our temperature gauge hit 105 as we turned in to the parking lot at Santa Elena Canyon, where the Rio Grande cuts through 1,500-foot-high limestone cliffs—taller than the Empire State Building—with Mexico on one side and the U.S. on the other. We wandered in but I turned back early, melting. When I couldn’t work the car’s air-conditioning, I ran to the river to call to my husband. “James! James!” I hollered into the canyon’s mouth. “James! James!” it echoed back. When he got back to the car, he said he hadn’t heard me; the chasm had swallowed my voice whole.



A “star party” at McDonald Observatory. PHOTO: MAX BURKHALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Our last night in Marfa, we drove up the switchback roads of the Davis Mountains to the McDonald Observatory for one of its thrice-weekly “star parties,” where dozens of people collectively gape at the expanding universe. James Dean died at 24, shortly after he wrapped “Giant,” and never saw it released. He did, I was told, make it to the observatory on a Sunday off during filming, but it was closed. After the caretaker told Dean to come back during business hours, the caretaker’s wife was horrified and made him give Dean a private tour.

Call me crazy but I could feel a nonconformist’s spirit up there, in the blackest sky, and in all of Marfa’s oxymorons: its mountains and flatlands, the parched desert and the Rio Grande. Nothing, and everything.

THE LOWDOWN // Touching Down in Marfa, Texas



Marfa, Tx. PHOTO: JASON LEE

Getting There: Marfa's closest major airport is 190 miles away in El Paso, or you can drive seven hours from Austin. You can also arrange a private plane charter to the Marfa Municipal Airport.

Staying There: Built in 1930 in Spanish Baroque style, Hotel Paisano has 41 rooms, many with private patios and fireplaces; in the lobby, taxidermied longhorn and copies of *Livestock Weekly* sit out unironically (from \$119 a night, hotelpaisano.com). Hip and modern Hotel Saint George opened last spring (from \$195 a night, marfasaintgeorge.com). The Cibolo Creek Ranch, secluded on 30,000 acres a 40-minute drive from Marfa, offers 35 antique-filled guest rooms, five of them housed in renovated 19th-century adobe-walled forts (from \$465 a night, cibolocreekranch.com).

Eating There: Marfa Burrito is an authentic Mexican hole-in-the-wall in the middle of Marfa (but only an hour from Mexico); you want the bean and cheese burrito, wrapped in a house-made flour tortilla (325-514-8675, 515 S. Highland Ave.). For a high-end dinner, the Capri is the place; you can sip a note-perfect pisco sour in a hammock until your dry-aged, fire-grilled rib-eye is done (601 W. San Antonio St., thunderbirdmarfa.com).