

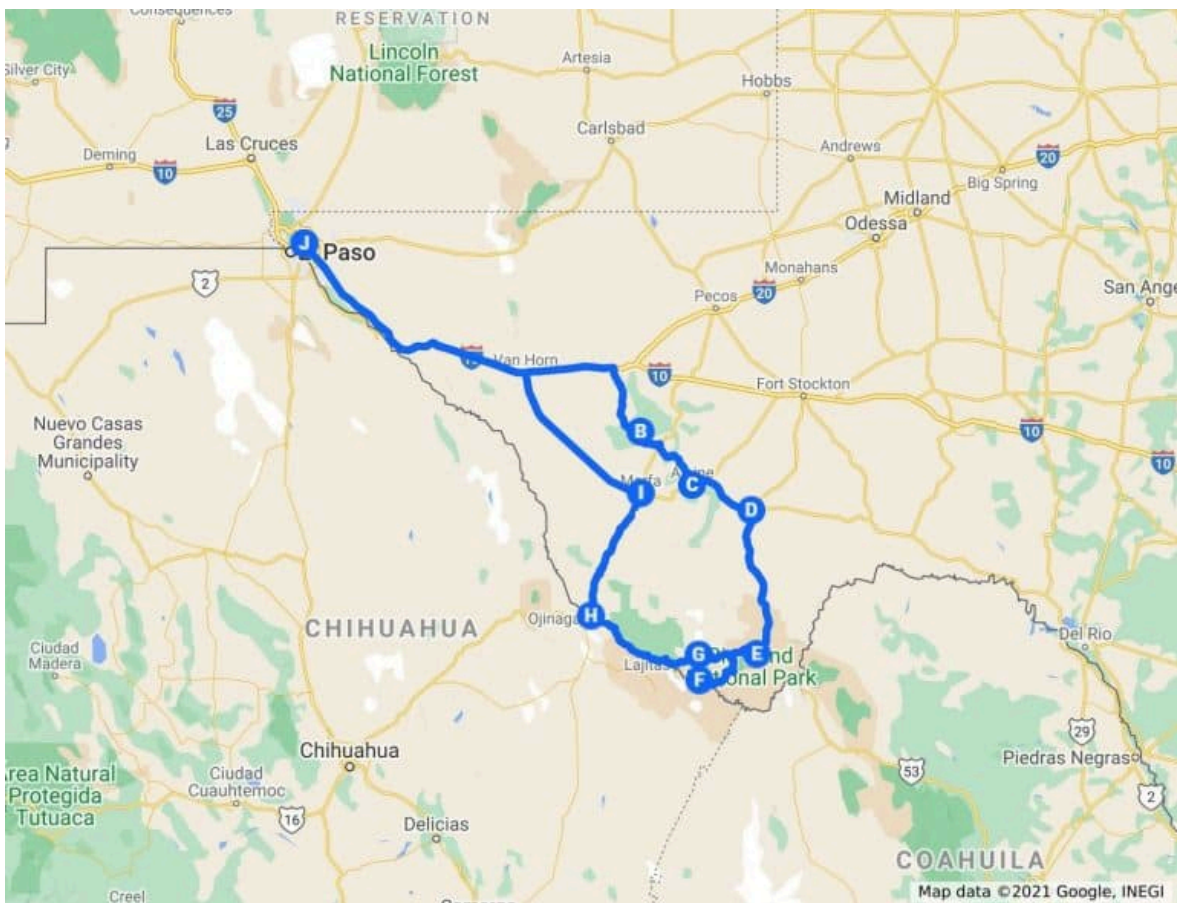


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4 Days In Big Bend: A West Texas Road Trip

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A long weekend road trip to Big Bend that'll have you coming back for years to come.

It's called Big Bend for a reason – people aren't kidding when they say everything is bigger in Texas. Also known as Far West Texas or Transpecos, it's larger than South Carolina. Still, it is home to fewer than a hundred thousand people outside the populous El Paso metro. The area is defined by the beautiful, desolate Chihuahuan Desert, North America's largest, and the sweeping bend in the Rio Grande that gives the region its name. And remote doesn't even begin to describe most parts of the area. No matter where you are, you're practically a few hours from anywhere.

All of these issues mean most Americans (and even many Texans) have never made the trek. But they're missing out on some of the state's most unbelievable natural beauty, quirkiest small towns, and authentic border culture. With just a few days, you can get a taste of the region that'll have you coming back for more again and again.

West Texas Road Trip Day One: El Paso to Marathon (265 miles)

Start your trip in El Paso, the region's largest city. Home to more than 9 out of 10 Far West Texas residents, it straddles the U.S.-Mexico border across the Rio Grande from the city of Juarez. Before heading out of town, take a spin along the [Scenic Drive](#) in the Franklin Mountains on the city's edge. You'll be treated to unbeatable views of El Paso, Juarez, and the ([channelized, concrete-lined](#)) Rio Grande that forms the border. Take a mental picture (and actual one!) – it'll be hard to believe this is the same river we'll see again later.

El Paso and Juarez from Scenic Drive – Dec. 2018

Hitting The Road

Head out of town and point your car east to begin your West Texas road trip. The El Paso suburbs will slip away until you find yourself cruising through the desert. Just a note on vehicles – for this trip, just about any car will do, but the area (especially Big Bend National Park) has plenty of great primitive roads for those who like something a little rougher. Leave I-10 for the two-lane Highway 118 south. This road snakes through scrub desert and into the Davis Mountains, and past [McDonald Observatory](#).

The sheer remoteness of this part of Texas makes for [excellent stargazing](#), telescope or not. But for those in the area at night, the observatory's visitors center hosts sky viewings several times a week during parts of the year, as well as daytime tours. This will have to wait for another trip, however, as we head onward toward Marathon.

Grab some lunch and stretch your legs in Fort Davis, a small town just down the road from McDonald Observatory. Try the Fort Davis Drug Store, where [retro style meets stick-to-your-ribs cooking](#).

Photo via [fddrugstore.com](#)

Your Destination For The Night: Marathon

Continue down Highway 90 through the town of Alpine, home to Sul Ross State University and Amtrak's Big Bend stop. In less than an hour, you've arrived in Marathon. One of several

gateways to Big Bend National Park, this small town of less than 500 isn't short on character or style. Check into your accommodations at the Gage Hotel, [a hotel of surprising history and luxury for such a remote outpost](#).

Gage Hotel, Marathon, TX – Dec. 2018

More budget-minded travelers can rest in comfort just a few hundred yards down the road at the [Marathon Motel and RV Park](#). Rest up after your long drive before heading out for dinner. If you're in the mood for some gourmet fare, check out the [12 Gage Restaurant](#) located at the Gage Hotel. For a more casual experience, try [Brick Vault Brewery and Barbecue](#) down the street. Wind down your night with some stargazing. Don't get too lost in the cosmos – you've got a big day tomorrow.

West Texas Road Trip Day Two: Big Bend National Park (190-200 miles)

Get an early start today. The only limit to the number of things to see in Big Bend [National Park](#) is your time. About the size of the state of Rhode Island, the park is split into three major climates – desert, mountains, and river. In fact, it's the only national park to contain the entirety of a mountain range within it, the [Chisos Mountains](#). Since we only have a day, we'll be heading first to one of the park's most well-known and accessible wonders, [Santa Elena Canyon](#), at the end of the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive.

The French Co. Grocer, Marathon, TX – Dec. 2018

But by the end of this visit, you'll already be making plans for your next trip (including crossing the border by rowboat to the [Mexican town of Boquillas](#)).

Before leaving Marathon, grab some food for a picnic lunch at [The French Co. Grocer](#). You can opt for sandwiches, but this little store punches way above its weight, and you're on vacation – treat yourself!

Head south toward the park's Persimmon Gap entrance, about a 45-minute drive from Marathon. On the way, marvel at the wide-open vistas and sprawling ranches that ring the park. This is also your last chance to download some music or a podcast onto your phone. You're unlikely to have cell service once you enter the park and even terrestrial radio is spotty, unless you like Mexican religious stations.)

Big Bend National Park Persimmon Gap Entrance – Dec. 2018

You'll soon arrive at Panther Junction, the location of the park's main visitor's center. Spend some time learning about the [history of this extraordinary land](#) and how it came to be a national park.

L: Panther Junction Visitor Center, Big Bend National Park R: Topographic Model Of Big Bend National Park at Panther Junction

Make sure to gas up before heading out. It's your last chance any time soon, and you don't want to end up stuck on one of these park roads, hoping a ranger comes by!

Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive And Santa Elena Canyon

Head toward the [Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive](#), one of Big Bend National Park's premier attractions. The 30-mile route snakes past the ruins of former ranches and dramatic overlooks to the Castolon Historic District ([tragically damaged in a 2019 fire](#)) and Santa Elena Canyon. Take your time and enjoy this drive. You're not likely to run into too many others, and this is some of America's most beautiful and remote scenery.

The Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive in Big Bend National Park – Dec. 2018

Kit Mountain And Black Mesa Along Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive, Big Bend National Park – Dec. 2018

With time to stop for pictures and admire the views, it will take you a little over an hour to reach Santa Elena Canyon, our destination.

Santa Elena Canyon, Big Bend National Park – Dec. 2018

The canyon's nearly 1500 foot high walls are split by the Rio Grande (remember him from El Paso?), marking one of the most dramatic parts of the U.S.-Mexico border. Just days after

staring out at the sprawl of El Paso-Juarez, it's a breathtaking contrast. Hiking into the canyon is a must-do if the Terlingua Creek isn't too high. Wade across the creek to a short, 1.7-mile round-trip, moderate-intensity trail into the canyon.

Banks Of The Rio Grande, Looking Into Mexico, Big Bend National Park – Dec. 2018

Along The Santa Elena Canyon Trail, Looking North Toward The Chisos Mountains, Big Bend National Park – Dec. 2018

Listen to the gently flowing river, the rustling of the wind in the reeds, and the dramatic gunshot-sounding booms when rocks slip from the edges of the cliffs across the river.

Take some time and rest here. Enjoy your lunch and a few quiet moments in this beautiful, remote place. Suddenly, it's almost hard to fathom the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Vow to come back on [a river trip someday](#), and then head back up the trail to your car.

Depending on the time of year and what time you got your start, spend the rest of the afternoon slowly working your way back up the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive, checking out any hikes or other sights you'd like to see. The Sam Nail Ranch and Blue Creek Ranch offer a look at former homesteads that existed before the park's creation.

L: Remains Of A Windmill At Sam Nail Ranch, Big Bend National Park R: Burro Mesa, Big Bend National Park
More experienced hikers looking for another day hike can try the [Lower Burro Mesa Pour-Off Trail](#) (1-mile round-trip) or [Mules Ears Trail](#) (3.9 miles round-trip). Those with the experience and vehicle necessary to navigate dirt roads can instead head back on the 14-mile [Old Maverick Road](#), which passes several historic sites.

A Peek At The Chisos Mountains

Image by Jonathan Cutrer via [Flickr](#)

You've seen the river, and you've seen the desert. But a day in Big Bend wouldn't be complete without checking out the park's third major climate, the Chisos Mountains. Take the 6-mile Chisos Basin Road (constructed by the Depression-era [Civilian Conservation Corps](#)) as it winds up more than 2,000 feet into the mountains, ending at another of the park's visitor's centers. Take note of how the weather has changed from your time in the canyon. The temperature difference between the two can be quite noticeable, so dress in layers! Soak in some of the views from the short paved trails near the visitor's center before hopping back in the car to head to your accommodations for the night.

Your West Texas Road Trip Destination For The Night: Terlingua

Just outside the park's western entrance lies the town of Terlingua, known worldwide for its [chili cook-off](#).

Terlingua, TX – Dec. 2018

This tiny, funky, semi-ghost town attracts all sorts of the kind of folks you'd expect to live at the edge of nowhere. There's plenty of cool, unusual places to stay in the area, but nothing beats [Basecamp Terlingua's Bubbles](#).

L: Basecamp Terlingua Bubble, Terlingua, TX R: Bubble From Outside At Night

These self-contained, air-inflated transparent plastic bubbles allow you to fall asleep gazing at the stars and wake up to a West Texas sunrise unlike anything you've ever seen. These bubbles are strategically positioned for your privacy, so no worries about anyone seeing inside. It's truly a hotel unlike any other you've seen before.

For dinner, it's your choice between [La Kiva](#) (a bar and restaurant built into an underground cave and home to some of [Terlingua's most lurid history](#)) and the [Starlight Theater](#), so named because it once operated without a roof!

Starlight Theater, Terlingua, TX – Dec. 2018

Feel free to enjoy a drink or two after dinner – you've earned it with the first half of this West Texas road trip. Or, just head back to the bubble and dream of your trip down one of America's most scenic roads tomorrow. You've earned that, too.

Next: [Days 3 and 4 in the Big Bend Road Trip...](#)

◀ Park Views: Piney Branch Parkway

4 Days in Big Bend: A West Texas Road Trip Pt. 2 ▶

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