

# BIG BEND ON WHEELS

WHETHER IN A CAR, ON A MOTORCYCLE OR RIDING A BICYCLE, THE  
ROADS OF FAR WEST TEXAS ARE READY FOR YOU.

by **JENNIFER BOOMER**



PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELLE LYNEE



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**BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK** and the surrounding areas display the unaltered beauty of Texas more than any other part of the state. Home to some of the most breathtaking vistas the state has to offer, it's a land of few roads, few people, but all the while, full of adventure. Whether you prefer to travel by bicycle, car or motorcycle, we've compiled a guide to help you explore the back roads of Far West Texas, discovering the secret gems of the state and ensuring you'll make the most of your trip to Texas' greatest treasure.



### **Pinto Canyon Road**

Pinto Canyon Road (FM 2810 and FM 170) lies southwest of Marfa between the Chinati Mountains and the southern end of the Sierra Vieja in Presidio County. The 52-mile (84 Kilometers) winding road has a creek flowing to the Rio Grande.

Many visitors to Big Bend have never heard of, much less drive down Pinto Canyon Road. If you are looking for a true West Texas experience, Pinto Canyon Road is your ticket to getting there. With views of Chinati Peak (elevation 7,728 ft.) this winding road full of potholes and large rocks will surely not disappoint. Extending from Marfa to Ruidosa, three-fifths of the road is maintained by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) while the remaining part of the road is unpaved and infrequently maintained. We strongly recommend a four wheel drive vehicle, and if you get stuck or break down, be mindful that there are few passers by and rare cell phone service.

## River Road



The River Road, the world-famous 67-mile (108 kilometers) stretch between Presidio and Study Butte, is an adventurous road alongside the Rio Grande where the West Texas sky seems bigger and the landscape even grander. Anytime of year makes for a terrific day-long adventure on the River Road, however the spring (through April), and to a lesser extent the fall, offer blooming wildflowers — bluebonnets (February into

March), mustards, yucca, ocotillo among others. As you drive this stretch of road, you catch glimpses of the muddy Rio Grande. On your drive, make sure to stop at the top of Big Hill for a spectacular view. The view looks east to the Chisos and west into Colorado Canyon. The canyon below is called locally Dark Canyon. As the road continues on, you'll also pass a the Contrabando movie set which makes a great place to get your feet wet in the cooling Rio Grande. For those intrepid hikers, make sure to stop at Closed Canyon Trail, located almost exactly halfway between Presidio and Terlingua, in Big Bend Ranch State Park. The 1.4 mile round-trip hike takes you inside a canyon full of smooth rock with bars of small gravel and tinajas (small basins or pools carved in hard rock by erosion). The canyon takes you to the Rio Grande, though you'll need rappelling gear to descend. Primitive roadside campsites (permit required) located along the road, allow for extended exploration. For campsite reservations call the Big Bend Ranch State Park reservation line at (512) 389-8919.

## Fort Davis Scenic Loop



The Fort Davis Scenic Loop is a goal for many of Texas' best cyclists. With a starting elevation of just over 5,000 feet to a peak of 6,260 feet, the 74-mile ride takes riders past the famed McDonald Observatory and through the charming community of Fort Davis. Total elevation gain of 3,146 feet makes this one of the most challenging and scenic rides in the state. But no matter if you plan drive or ride the loop, you will not be disappointed, as it cuts

through open plains of blond grasses and past the occasional group of pronghorn antelope.

## Big Bend National Park



Comprised of 1,252 square miles of land, Big Bend National Park is larger than the state of Rhode Island. It is the most biologically diverse park, with more species of plants, birds, bats, butterflies and reptiles, than any other U.S. national park. Although visitors usually spend a few days driving or biking through its rugged mountain scenery, you could easily spend much more time exploring this vast park. One of the truly unique features of Big Bend National Park is the extensive network of

roads. With over 100 miles of pavement to explore, and another 150 miles of dirt roads, you will surely not be disappointed. Just be sure to check all road conditions at a ranger station before heading out on your adventure.

## Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive

The Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive is one of those unforgettable stretches of road that unfolds before you in a series of winding turns and breathtaking vistas. This 30 mile stretch (48 kilometers) leads to the Castolon Historic District, and another 6 miles will get you to Santa Elena Canyon. An impressive short walk (a little more than a mile in length round trip) can be taken into the canyon. Named after Big Bend National Park's first superintendent, the road showcases some of the historic and geologic features that Far West Texas is famous for. Make sure to stop at the Sotol Vista Overlook, high above the desert floor you'll be able to scan the western side of the park and catch a glimpse of the majestic Santa Elena Canyon in the distance. From the Mule Ears Overlook you'll take in the distant twin peaks. If you're up for more hiking take the trail from the parking area that ends at a refreshing desert spring.

## Old Maverick Road

The Old Maverick Road runs between Maverick Junction and Santa Elena Canyon, creating the perfect place to see the western view of the Chisos. Passing along the Terlingua Creek badlands on the west side of the park, this 14 mile (22 kilometers) dirt road has a number of historic sites along its way as you gradually descend to the Rio Grande and Santa Elena. The Maverick is recommended for higher clearance vehicles, as this road tends to be rough and washboarded. This road is subject to high water and flooding following rainstorms. If you plan to ride your bicycle on this road, take note that it is easiest from north to south.

## Old Ore Road

Old Ore Road is a 26 mile (42 kilometers) unpaved road that offers scenic views, but is more suited for four-wheel-drive vehicles or mountain biking. If driving, the north to south route is recommended. All of the road's climbs are very rocky with a fair amount of washouts. Used in the early 1900s to transport ore from Mexican mines to the railroad station at Marathon, the Old Ore Road generally follows the route used by mule and pack trains a century ago. The road has excellent views of the Chisos Mountains across the Tornillo Creek drainage to the west. Ernst Tinaja, five miles from the southern end of the road, is a popular destination.

## Rio Grande Facts



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The Rio Grande is the 22nd longest river in the world and the fourth longest in North America. It runs for 1800 miles, and begins in Colorado and ends in the Gulf of Mexico in Texas. In 1978, over 200 miles of the Rio Grande in Big Bend was designated by Congress into the National Wild and Scenic River System in order to preserve the river's outstanding natural, cultural and recreational values for future generations.



**WIDE OPEN SPACES:** *The roads of Far West Texas have been named many times as some of the most scenic in the country. There is no traffic, dramatic elevation changes, unique scenery and great places to stop along the way. Maybe this is where the phrase "getting there is half the fun" was derived.*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JENNIFER BOOMER, BLAKE BURWELL, JENNIFER BOOMER, JENNIFER BOOMER



## Area Events

Whether you prefer to explore Far West Texas by car, motorcycle or bicycle, there are plenty of events throughout the year that celebrate all that the region has to offer.

### < BIG BEND OPEN ROAD RACE

APRIL 2016

One of the most challenging open road races in the world, the Big Bend Open Road Race between Fort Stockton and Sanderson brings hundreds of people from all over the world to Far West Texas each April. For information call (432) 336-2264 or visit the event website at [www.bbrr.com](http://www.bbrr.com).

### < CHIHUAHUA DESERT BIKE FEST

FEBRUARY 11-13, 2016

Geared towards dirt lovers of every ability and adventure-readiness, riders chose from an exciting menu of guided rides on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. There is also a unique 2-day self-guided EPIC Option, while other riders choose to bike the open trails of the Big Bend Ranch State Park and Lajitas Golf Resort at their leisure. [www.desertsportstx.com/mountain-bike-event](http://www.desertsportstx.com/mountain-bike-event)

### RIDE FOR TRAILS

OCTOBER 16-17, 2015

The 18th Annual Ride 4 Trails Motorcycle Rally benefits Big Bend National Park in the construction and maintenance of hiking trails in the park. [www.ride4trails.com](http://www.ride4trails.com)

### < DRIVE BIG BEND

JULY 30-AUGUST 1, 2015

Drive Big Bend is a car festival in Alpine, Marfa, Presidio and the Big Bend region. Activities include a car show at historic Kokernot Field (in Alpine), happy hours, driving tours, poker run, drive-in movies and more. The inaugural event is July 30-August 1, 2015. [www.drivebigbend.com](http://www.drivebigbend.com)