

# HIGH ON HISTORY

## Travelers Discover Heritage, Natural Wonders in Texas Mountain Trail Region

In the Texas Mountain Trail Region, encountering the past doesn't take much time, distance or imagination. History is always close at hand. Sun-baked adobe structures appear much as they did a hundred years ago; frontier forts remain enduring rugged outposts; and mountain trails lead to magnificent untouched vistas.

The area's remote nature enhances its preservation. Since urban sprawl and redevelopment are not major factors, century-old buildings and their environs often receive the same consideration residents bestow upon each other in this region: live and let live.

"Out here, stories about Texans being on the frontier and living off the land aren't too far removed from history," says Beth Nobles, executive director of the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Texas Mountain Trail Region.

"You'll often find that the only man-made thing around you is the road that got you there. It gives you a real sense of how this corner of the state has always appeared."

Nobles prefers to experience much of the region by bike, allowing her to absorb the elements that make this landscape so appealing. Stretches of Highway 54 between Van Horn and Guadalupe Mountains National Park are unobstructed with power lines, litter is virtually nowhere to be found and the air contains an unmatched purity.

"It's amazing when you're not in your car, because you really start noticing the lack of human-generated sights and sounds," she says. "You also get a true sense of what distance meant to the people who lived off the land here and what it was like to be exposed to the elements for hours at a time. There aren't too

many other places in Texas, or even the entire country, where you can experience that."

Also distinctive to the Texas Mountain Trail Region are adobe structures, constructed with sun-dried bricks made of earth, grass and water. The thick walls are often covered with a plaster-based material to help insulate against extreme weather conditions. Though some adobe structures in Far West Texas are in danger of eroding due to the intense sun and wind, many are being restored.

"Adobe structures are so beautiful — there's something viscerally appealing about the sun-washed gray, the intricacies of light and shadow and the way everything is framed by the wonderful soft shapes and subtlety of texture," Nobles says.

From adobe buildings to breathtaking views to cultural legacies,



*Left: Adobe buildings in Valentine; right: Marfa's Hotel Paisano; far right: a mural in Marfa's Building 98. Background: Chinati Mountains. On the cover: the road to Ruidosa.*

Nobles encourages Texans to make the effort to experience the Texas Mountain Trail Region. Though it may take extra time and planning to schedule a visit from other parts of the state, she believes the effort will be duly rewarded.

“Even if you just come out to marvel at the sky from your car, you won’t regret it,” she says. “I constantly stop, look at the sky, notice how pure and vast it is and think, ‘Wow — this is a sight to behold. This is a great-to-be-alive sky!’ ”

## The Mountain Trail Less Traveled

Texas Mountain Trail Region travelers are occasionally overwhelmed by the area’s sheer immensity, with maps depicting long drives between communities and seemingly isolated locations. After experiencing these conditions, however, visitors find the remote aspects are a major part of Far West Texas’ appeal. Lengthy drives are highlighted by calming mountain views, refreshingly sparse traffic and enlightening historical markers.

For those who haven’t visited the region, Marfa is a good starting point. Consider setting a home base at the historic Hotel Paisano, a beautifully restored 1930 Spanish Colonial hotel that hosted cattlemen in the 1930s and the cast of the movie “Giant” in the 1950s.

The nearby Presidio County Courthouse, restored through the THC’s Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, is a must-see for new and seasoned visitors, as is the innovative adapted reuse of Fort D.A. Russell — a former army base that’s now home to the art-filled Building 98 (see sidebar at right) and Chinati Foundation. Other well-known attractions offering noteworthy historical perspectives of the region include Fort Davis National Historic Site in Fort Davis (21 miles north of Marfa) and the Museum of the Big Bend in Alpine (26 miles east).

However, it’s the historical destinations at the far reaches of this region that offer deeper perspective and fascinating insight, bringing the real stories of Far West Texas’ mystique to life. Since it can be challenging to gauge the amount of time needed to explore these remote locales, the following itineraries provide an overview of the often-overlooked yet compelling attractions heritage travelers can reasonably expect to discover in a day.



## Art in Place

From the outside, Building 98 in Marfa appears rather unassuming, with neutral styling and small wooden letters proclaiming its institutional name. Step inside, however, and the building’s multi-faceted history is unavoidable.

Constructed in 1920, the adobe structure housed the officers club and bachelor officers quarters for the Army’s Fort D.A. Russell. It is more renowned, however, for its occupants during World War II — particularly the German prisoners of war (POW), who painted colorful panoramic murals on many interior walls.

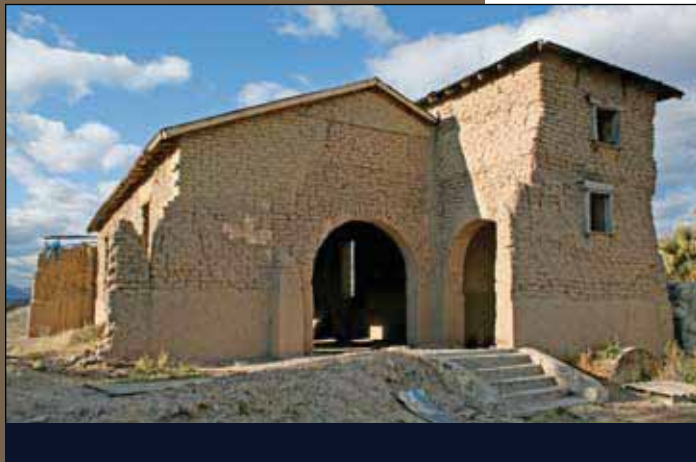
“This is the largest collection of POW art in the entire country,” explains Mona Blocker Garcia, the building’s owner and president of the art-based International Woman’s Foundation, headquartered in the facility.

The colorful murals are compelling, especially considering they were created with house paint by war prisoners from Field Marshall Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Korps. The POWs, inspired by their time in Marfa, devoted most of their murals to capturing the surrounding wide-open landscapes. The artists were later identified as R. Hampel and Hans Jurgen Press; notably, Press would become a famous illustrator and author of children’s books in post-war Europe.

“We have visitors and artists coming here from all over the world,” Garcia says. “People are absolutely flabbergasted when they come in here.”

*To schedule a tour of Building 98, contact Mona Garcia at 432.729.4826.*





## Day 1

From Marfa, take Highway 67 south to Presidio. This route features stunning views of the Chinati Mountains and two THC historical markers related to legendary rancher Milton Faver and his extensive cattle operations.

### Shafter

Identified by highway signs as a ghost town, Shafter is located 40 miles south of Marfa. This once-thriving mining community is now virtually empty, except for the noteworthy Sagrado Corazon de Jesus adobe church (1890) and several buildings related to the Presidio Mining Company, intermittently active from 1882–1942.

According to the National Register listing for Shafter Historic Mining District, large volumes of silver and lead were discovered, leading to the construction of nearly 100 miles of tunnels, 300 employed miners and a company town with homes and a hospital. Visitors can learn more about the community at Brooks Cemetery (1904), which includes a museum, interpretive plaques and a THC marker.



### Presidio

Twenty miles south of Shafter lies Presidio, a border community of nearly 4,100 residents. The Handbook of Texas Online claims Presidio is the oldest continually cultivated area in the U.S., noting that farmers have lived there since 1500 B.C.

The community's premier heritage tourism attraction is Fort Leaton State Historic Site, a one-acre adobe fortified compound. In 1848, trader Ben Leaton purchased the property and developed it into a 40-room structure that served as his home and a trading post along the Chihuahua Trail.

The massive building, which has undergone several restorations in the past century, is a remarkable example of regional adobe architecture. The dozens of intact rooms showcase the style's distinctive earthen texture, softly curved angles and hand-hewn cottonwood ceiling joists. Several exhibits and THC markers highlight the fort's history, including Leaton's controversial and violent dealings as a regional trader.

### Ruidosa

Located 36 miles west of Presidio, Ruidosa is a virtual ghost town with a substantial occupant. The Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church (circa 1914) is recognized as one of the most significant adobe structures in the state, with three large arches considered the largest existing round-structural adobe arches in Texas.

Though the church lies in partial ruins, its architectural and historic importance have prompted historians to organize considerable restoration

## If You Go...

To learn more about the heritage tourism destinations featured in this article, contact:

### Clark Hotel Museum

Van Horn  
432.283.8028

### Fort Leaton State Historic Site

Presidio  
432.229.3613  
[www.tpwd.state.tx.us/parks](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/parks)

### Guadalupe Mountains National Park

915.828.3251  
[www.nps.gov/gumo/](http://www.nps.gov/gumo/)

### Hotel El Capitan

Van Horn  
877.283.1220  
[www.hotelcapitan.net](http://www.hotelcapitan.net)

### Hotel Paisano

Marfa  
432.729.3669  
[www.hotelpaisano.com](http://www.hotelpaisano.com)

### Texas Mountain Trail Region

432.284.0002  
[www.texasmountaintrail.com](http://www.texasmountaintrail.com)

*Above: Ruidosa's Sacred Heart of Jesus church; left: Shafter's Sagrado Corazon de Jesus church. Opposite page: Presidio's Fort Leaton State Historic Site.*

efforts. In 2005, the THC awarded an emergency Texas Preservation Trust Fund grant to the Ruidosa Mission Project to help stabilize the structure by replacing the roof, fortifying the foundation and grading the site for drainage. Though a complete restoration may be prohibitively expensive, organizers continue to promote awareness and fund-raising efforts for the endangered church. Contact Marge Hughes with the Ruidosa Mission Project at 432.729.4452 for more information.

To return from Ruidosa to Marfa, there are two options. One is to retrace the lengthy yet scenic trek through Presidio and Shafter. The other — more adventurous yet ultimately worthwhile — is Pinto Canyon Road, which leads from Ruidosa to Marfa. A 4x4 vehicle is needed to navigate the rocky terrain, but the effort is rewarded with exceptional views from within the Chinati mountain range. The nearly two-hour trek provides a connection to the region's rugged natural beauty through rare bird and plant sightings and astonishing vistas of purely untouched landscapes.

## Day 2

Departing from Marfa, head west on Highway 90 toward Van Horn. After soaking up the mountain scenery for nearly 30 miles, be on the lookout for a small yet significant cultural attraction: Prada Marfa. A notable work of installation art, the “store” is considered a playful commentary on the dichotomy between commercialism and the structure's stark location.

## Van Horn

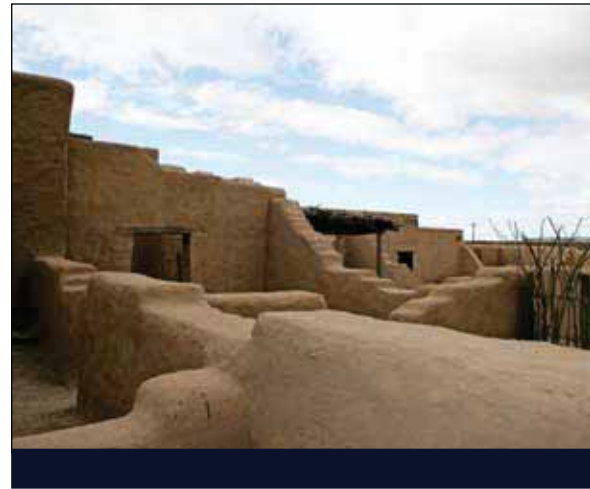
Forty miles past the tiny community of Valentine lies Van Horn, which traces its origins to the 1881 arrival of the Texas and Pacific Railway. Currently serving as home base for the Texas Mountain Trail Region, Van Horn (population circa 2,500) hosts many cross-country travelers due to its location on Interstate 10 and proximity to Guadalupe Mountains National Park.

The community has two historic hotels, one repurposed as a heritage center (Clark Hotel Museum) and one recently refurbished to its 1930 grandeur (Hotel El Capitan). The Capitan was designed by noted El Paso architect Henry Trost and served as a cattleman's hotel for 40 years before becoming the Van Horn State Bank. Its extensive renovation captures the detail and spirit of Van Horn's proud Western legacy.

## Guadalupe Mountains National Park

State Highway 54, a 55-mile-long road between Van Horn and Guadalupe Mountains National Park, has been described as one of the state's most beautiful stretches of scenery. It's easy to see why. The drive north from Van Horn offers breathtaking views of the Sierra Diablo Mountains and Guadalupe Peak, Texas' highest point (8,749 feet).

The park offers 85 miles of trails, several campsites and historical attractions across more than 86,000 acres. Day visitors can explore the region's heritage at the park's Frijoles Ranch History Museum, Pinery stagecoach ruins and secluded Williams Ranch (accessible via a seven-mile-long road requiring a 4x4 vehicle).



## Day 3

By now, travelers may want to consider shifting operations from Marfa to another part of the region. Big Bend National Park, 90 miles to the southeast, offers many heritage-related opportunities, including several National Register districts, exhibits and hikes to historical sites.

Nearly 200 miles west is El Paso, the region's largest city. Though some travelers may be familiar with popular destinations like the THC's Magoffin Home State Historic Site, the Mission Trail, Fort Bliss and El Paso Museum of Archaeology, lesser-known historical attractions beckon with captivating cultural charm, including Concordia Cemetery, Mercado Mayapan and Keystone Heritage Park.

“Regardless of your destination, this region really provides an incredible escape,” Nobles says. “You can experience Texas history and culture in a way that can't be duplicated anywhere else.” ★

*Article and photos by Andy Rhodes, managing editor of The Medallion.*

