

Open Road

# Oasis of Quiet

## Soaking up West Texas at Chinati Hot Springs and Big Bend Ranch State Park

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Image: [Gary Norad](#)

**I WASN'T QUITE PREPARED FOR THE SCENERY** that awaited when I awoke that first morning at Chinati Hot Springs. We'd arrived late at night and all we'd seen was the interior of our adobe cabin, with its private patio and two-person soaking tub and outdoor fire pit—that and a sky so unpolluted by light the stars seemed to touch the horizon. What I didn't expect to see that Sunday morning: green grass, a grove of cottonwood trees likely older than living memory, and a running creek. Wasn't this the Chihuahuan Desert?

I'd been here many times before — usually to hike or camp at Big Bend National Park. On those trips, someone always seemed to mention Chinati, a resort so remote it didn't even show up on my map. Wanting to explore some of the lesser-known terrain in this vast region, we'd booked four nights at Chinati in hopes of also visiting a place an hour southeast of it, Big Bend Ranch State Park, which although adjacent to its more popular sibling, gets only a few thousand visitors a year.

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### Chinati Hot Springs

1 Hot Springs Rd  
432-229-4165

It had been quite a journey to get here. The most important thing to know about traveling into deep West Texas: you cannot be in a hurry. The trip takes roughly 12 hours from Houston, and toward the end of the journey the roads between towns become curvy, steep, and long—approaching the springs, you might not see a soul. All of which is to say that if you're looking for a quick weekend getaway, Big Bend is not the place. Still, your efforts will be richly rewarded; it's one of the most visually spectacular and calming destinations in the state.

[chinatihotsprings.net](http://chinatihotsprings.net)

## Big Bend Ranch State Park

432-358-4444

[tpwd.state.tx.us](http://tpwd.state.tx.us)

Image: [Gary Norad](#)

One of many dramatic views at Big Bend Ranch State Park.



Chinati Hot Springs was founded in 1937 in the valley of a small canyon an hour from the closest town, Presidio. The name might sound familiar to regular visitors to Marfa — the Chinati Foundation art museum also takes its name from the small mountain range separating the town from the springs. It's possible to cross the mountains to the hot springs from Marfa by way of a 50-mile, single-lane, unpaved road that skirts the foothills of the range. By all accounts, however, that journey is beautiful but hair-raising. If you don't have the stomach for it (or don't have high-clearance or four-wheel drive), you can still get to the springs by cutting down from Marfa and taking FM 170 through Presidio, which is what we did.

A cozy cabin at Chinati Hot Springs. Photo courtesy Chinati Hot Springs



In the desert springs are a lifeline, and there are more than 100 of them in Big Bend Ranch. Unseen volcanic activity makes water sources finicky—there's a tiny cold-water spring bubbling through the canyon at Chinati that only popped up a few years ago, and as a result more animals have been on the property, including a mountain lion recently spotted by guests. The hot springs have been providing respite to the community for at least 150 years, and have healing powers to boot, if stories are to be believed.

From the mid-1800s to the 1980s, the place was known as Kingston Hot Springs, after the family that owned it. The cabins on the property were built by hand in the 1930s and originally had dirt floors; the screen doors and adobe walls today are original. In 1990 minimalist artist Donald Judd, who helped turn Marfa into an art community, bought the property and closed it to the public, upsetting the neighbors. After Judd died, the springs reopened and changed hands several times. Today they're owned by Houston businessman Jeff Fort and run by Diana Burbach and her husband Dan.

Image: [Gary Norad](#)

Closed Canyon is a great short hike.

The resort has several cabins ranging from \$85 to \$130 a night; the one we rented, Numero Uno, with its private tub and outdoor shower, is \$125. There are two private bathhouses on the property and a public shower as well, and rental of the property's primitive campsites includes use of the springs. The tubs are filled with its 109-degree water. (Day visits are also available, though reservations are recommended.)

At daybreak that first morning I saw water-fed life everywhere: birds, greenery, and a mix of both locals and travelers who'd come to the springs for a few nights' relaxation. The property's community kitchen was bustling as guests made coffee, fried eggs and, and prepared for the day's visit to area parks.

During our stay, visitors included a young woman from Oakland driving cross-country to Florida, two

separate groups of middle-aged men who'd first met in college and still get together once a year, and an Italian couple looking for a quiet place to settle and make art. The kitchen was the place where all these lives converged, even if just for a few minutes, before setting off into the desert.



Image: [Angel Schatz](#)

The community pool at Chinati Hot Springs.

**While Big Bend National Park** sits in the Chisos Mountains, Big Bend Ranch State Park, the largest of its kind at 300,000 acres, is located on less mountainous terrain to the west. Among its features are several hundred miles of hiking trails and the impossible-to-reach Madrid Falls, the second highest waterfall in the state. Unlike the 800,000-acre national park, it's operated as an open ranch, with free-range longhorn roaming.

On Sunday morning we headed to the state park, traveling south from the springs on FM 170, which hugs the Rio Grande. One of the most spectacular scenic drives in the United States, the 50-mile portion of the road between Presidio and Lajitas known as the Camino del Rio follows the twists and turns of the river along with the dips of tributary arroyos, steep mountain crests, and canyon walls cut into ancient volcanic rock. Sometimes you can see children playing or fishing across the border. The Camino abounds with scenic turn-offs, many of them entrances to Big Bend Ranch's hiking trails. The river's name feels apt here — the visuals are truly grand, especially when the sun is low and the rocks turn pink and green. In early spring, hearty bluebonnets line the road. Among the highlights of our drive: the sight of wild horses and one lazy, feral burro who just didn't feel like getting out of the way so we could pass.

Just past Presidio, we stopped at the Fort Leaton State Historic Site to pay our park entry fee (\$5 per person, per day). Feeling ambitious, we decided to tackle Rancherías Canyon, a hike recommended to us by the park ranger. The 10-mile trail culminates in a tall trickle of a waterfall known as Rancherías Falls, deep in the most remote reaches of the park. Allegedly. We didn't make it that far. The day was hotter than we expected — nearly 90 degrees, even in March — and we turned around after only four miles. In the remote desert, better safe than sorry.

Still, our hike was pleasant, albeit short — after about a mile, we found ourselves following a small creek through a canyon where desert cactus

## Desert Dining

You'll want to stock up on groceries for most of your meals at Chinati Hot Springs and Big Bend. On your way back from a day in the



and wildflowers bloomed in the shade of dramatic rock overhangs. The mud revealed plenty of animal tracks — rabbits in one section, something much larger in another. One jokester had made a sign of stones along the path reading “SHORTCUT,” with an arrow pointing to a steep cliff.

Two of the best short hikes in Big Bend Ranch are the Hoodoos Trail, featuring weird top-hatted geologic formations, and Closed Canyon, a gorge so narrow in spots you can touch both walls, worn smooth by centuries of flood water running toward the Rio Grande. Both are about one-and-a-half miles long and accessible off the Camino Del Rio.

On the way back to Chinati, we stopped in Presidio for lunch and then, because the hot springs are an hour from the closest restaurant or market, at a grocery store. One of the greatest pleasures of the entire trip was cooking outside, where the smell of grilled lamb and asparagus mingled with the dry air, listening to the sounds of the spring trickling. Dessert was a can of cold beer and a soak in the community hot pool at the bottom of the canyon as the sun set.

Besides the kitchen, the community pool is another spot where Chinati denizens gather. Situated directly across from the canyon wall, it makes for a good vantage point at morning and dusk, when the animals come out to feed and drink from the cold spring. We chatted with other guests into the evening. Days at Chinati are so relaxing, it’s easy to lose track of time — by conversation’s end the only lights left were the stars above and the solar-powered lanterns lining the pathway back to our cabin.

Monday was our last full day in the Big Bend area. Knowing the long drive home before us, we decided to spend it exploring as much of Chinati Hot Springs’ 640 acres as we could. We hiked up the opposite side of the canyon, following rock cairns for a few miles and stepping around flowering cactus and the occasional set of sun-bleached bones. Then we followed the creek at the bottom for a while, where the water-carved walls twist and turn, discovering a memorial to a long-lost loved one—a Virgin Mary statue, cross, and candle set into a rocky grotto niche.

That evening, we happened to have the entire place to ourselves, and so, before heading to bed, enjoyed one last soak in the community pool under the velvet night sky. The next day’s drive to Houston would be endless, but for the moment, I didn’t think about that, only my newfound oasis in the middle of the desert.

File Under: [Big Bend](#), [Chinati Hot Springs](#), [Marfa](#), [Presidio](#), [Alpine](#), [Alpine](#)

park, though, there’s good Tex-Mex in Presidio, 49 miles southeast of the springs. And on the drive in from Houston, there’s Marfa, which of course has a number of excellent restaurants, as does Alpine 26 miles east of Marfa, which is where we stopped.

### **Oasis Restaurant**

Presidio

Old Hwy 67 N

432-229-3998

In Presidio, an hour’s drive from Chinati Hot Springs, this is the place to eat. Get the enchiladas *verdes* or the pork *guisada* burrito. It’s a joint that rivals any Tex-Mex restaurant in Houston, and the food is even more delicious after a long hike.

### **The Saddle Club**

Alpine

211 E Holland Ave

432-837-9770

[saddleclubalpine.com](http://saddleclubalpine.com)

With a menu of local game meats and fancy Texas microbrews, The Saddle Club caters to

tourists, ranchers, and artistic types. It gets busy on weekends, and for good reason. Try the blood orange margarita or a pint of No. 22 Porter from the Big Bend Brewing Company. House specialties include antelope osso buco, wild mushroom-stuffed quail and chicken-fried bacon.