

# Rio Grande Valley



The Rio Grande (Big River; the Mexicans call it the Río Bravo, or Brave River) forms a natural border between Texas and Mexico. And nowhere during its 2000-mile course from Colorado's San Juan Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico is it more fraught with drama.

Immigration – legal and otherwise – drug wars and free trade are just some of the hot-button issues that dominate dialogue on either side. And where many of the twinned border towns like Laredo and Nuevo Laredo seemed on the verge of melding into one just a few years ago, the separation between the nations is far greater now than just the width of the river.

Certainly it's easy to define the border as a multibillion-dollar fence goes up on the US side. Meanwhile, it's sadly possible to (literally) lose sight of some of the region's great beauty. But under the guise of the World Birding Center, a string of parks and natural locations makes every effort to both woo and accommodate bird-watchers. Trails in places like the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge quickly remove visitors from the bustle of the east end of the valley and deposit them amid deeply wooded wetlands on the river, where trees drip with Spanish moss and birds chirp with abandon.

West along the valley, the Rio Grande passes sleepy burgs like Zapata and Langtry that seem like the fading sets of old westerns, while in Del Rio, as in other border towns, you can enjoy Mexican food that's as good as anywhere.

## HIGHLIGHTS

### Best Border Town

Stroll the old center and atmospheric, tree-lined avenues of Del Rio (p275)

### How to Leave the US without Trying

Brownsville (p265) has a downtown with buildings dating back to 1848 and shops that are pure Mexico

### Most Evocative Battlefield

Learn how today's politics were shaped on the sunburned expanse of the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Site (p267)

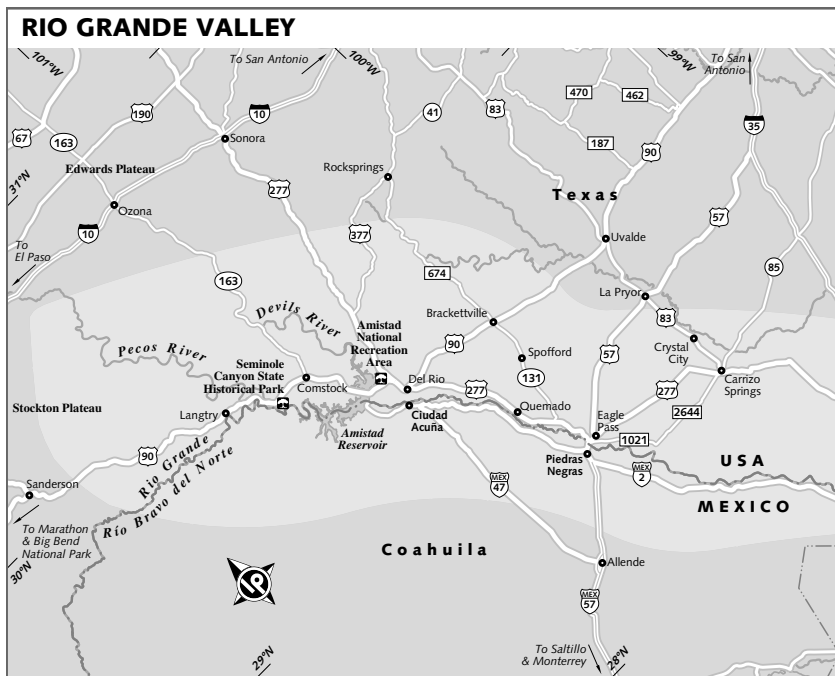
### Where Birds Rule Your Roost

The headquarters of the World Birding Center, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park (p270), has beautiful trails for finding feathered friends

### Walk on the Wild Side

Day trips to Mexico's counterparts (boxed text, p266) to US border towns can be richly rewarding, but consider issues about safety and bureaucracy first





## History

The Laredo border area was sparsely populated with nomadic Native American groups until Don Tomás Sánchez, a captain in the Spanish royal army, was given a grant of land here in 1775.

The first non-Indian settlers were ranchers, and missionaries passed through the area, heading into the interior of Texas.

In 1836 Texas seceded from Mexico, an act that inspired the Rio Grande Valley and much of what is now northeastern Mexico to declare itself a separate republic – the Republic of the Rio Grande – in 1840. With its capital at Laredo, the republic lasted just 283 days, until the Mexican army regained control.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War, ran the new border of the USA down the Rio Grande. Like much of Texas, the next century was largely about cattle and then oil.

The valley began a new boom in 1994 with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), which opened up trade across the border.

## RIO GRANDE VALLEY

The semitropical southern border area of Texas is much wetter than the arid west, thanks to the moisture-laden winds off the Gulf of Mexico. This lush environment is perfect for farming; much of the winter produce sold in the USA comes from Texas.

The temperate winter climate attracts hordes of migratory creatures. A breed known as ‘Winter Texans’ – American retirees from the north – arrives in flocks (see the boxed text, p273), as do more than 500 species of birds, who in turn attract flocks of bird-watchers to scores of natural spots.

The valley begins at the mouth of the Rio Grande, which meets the gulf in vast palm-studded wetlands, lagoons and remote beaches.

Further west in the valley, most of the land is given over to farming. In the lands west of McAllen, the gulf winds diminish and the land becomes more arid and unpopulated.