



# Big Bend & West Texas

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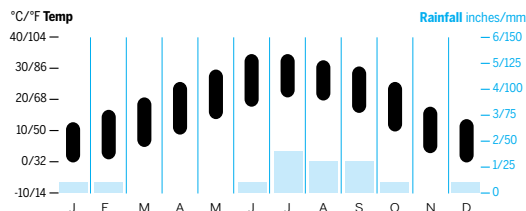
## Why Go?

Welcome to the land of wide open spaces. Along I-10 there's not much to look at – just scrub brush and lots of sky – but dip below the interstate and you'll find vistas that are as captivating as they are endless. Sometimes the rugged terrain looks like the backdrop in an old Western movie; other times it looks like an alien landscape, with huge rock formations suddenly jutting out of the desert.

But what is there to do? Plenty. Exploring an enormous national park that's nearly the size of Rhode Island. Stopping in small towns that surprise you with minimalist art, planet-watching parties or fascinating ghost-town ruins. Chatting with friendly locals whenever the mood strikes you. And letting the delicious slowness of west Texas get thoroughly under your skin.

## When to Go

### El Paso



**Jan & Feb**  
Forget winter weather – the desert is moderate and dry.

**Mar–May** Prime time: the weather is still cool and wildflowers are in bloom.

**Jul & Aug** If you can take the heat, you'll avoid a lot of the crowds.

## BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

Everyone knows Texas is huge. But you can't really appreciate just how big it is until you visit this **national park** ([www.nps.gov/bibe](http://www.nps.gov/bibe); 7-day pass per vehicle \$20), which is almost the same size as Rhode Island. When you're traversing Big Bend's 1252 sq miles, you come to appreciate what 'big' really means. It's a land of incredible diversity, vast enough to allow a lifetime of discovery, yet laced with enough well-placed roads and trails to permit short-term visitors to see a lot in two to three days.

Like many popular US parks, Big Bend has one area – the Chisos Basin – that absorbs the overwhelming crunch of traffic. The Chisos Mountains are beautiful, and no trip here would be complete without an excursion into the high country. But any visit to Big Bend should also include time in the Chihuahuan Desert, home to curious creatures and adaptable plants, and the Rio Grande, providing a watery border between the US and Mexico.

### When to Go

Most travelers consider spring and fall the best times to visit Big Bend National Park. Summer (June through August) is very hot, with typical daytime temperatures around 100°F; late summer can be rainy too. Spring means moderate temperatures and lots of wildflowers (and lots of people), and fall is also quite pleasant, especially for white-water rafting.

Some park-fanciers believe winter is the best time of all to come; it's usually relatively mild, although temperatures in the Chisos can fall below freezing and Basin Rd typically closes two or three times each winter,

sometimes for several days. But the snow is never deep enough to preclude hiking, and the touch of frost makes the trees and cacti a beautiful sight. At all times of the year, it's wise to layer your clothes in the morning and peel off the top layers as you warm up.

### Geology

For millions of years Big Bend lay at the bottom of the sea, part of a trough that extended into what is now Arkansas and Oklahoma. Over time the sea became shallower and eventually disappeared, leaving a wondrous fossil record of marine life and beds of limestone, both thick (the Sierra del Carmen and Santa Elena formations) and thin (the Boquillas formation). Once the sea was gone, the dinosaurs took over; Big Bend was especially favored by pterosaurs, the largest flying creatures ever with a wingspan of 35ft or more.

About 65 million years ago, the Cenozoic era began, and tectonic forces produced the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Madre. Volcanic activity followed, spreading ash and lava over thousands of miles in the region. Increased tensions in the earth's crust created faulting, dropping the central portion of the park while further elevating the Chisos Mountains. Meanwhile, the Rio Grande carved the great canyons that define the river today.

### Sights

#### Sam Nail Ranch

HISTORIC SITE

A short walk from the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive, just five minutes or so in, you'll find the ruins of the Sam Nail Ranch. The windmill still pumps for no one's benefit, and the ruins of the house and shed can feel vaguely haunted, especially at dusk.

#### Castolon Historic District

HISTORIC SITE

Dwarfed by the looming Sierra Ponce, the cluster of buildings that make up the Castolon Compound were built in 1920. A half-mile historic stroll offers a brief look at life on the frontier in the Castolon Historic District. Start at the famous La Harmonia Store, which is a mainstay for locals on both sides of the river as well as an ice-cream vending oasis for tourists. A pamphlet (\$1) sold in the store serves as a guide.

### Activities

#### Scenic Drives

Big Bend National Park has 110 miles of paved road and 150 miles of dirt road, and



### BEAR IN MIND...

There's a slim chance you'll encounter a black bear in the park. If you do, don't run away; instead make lots of noise and look as big as possible by waving your hands above your head. If you see cubs, back away slowly so the mother won't fear an attack. To keep bears from joining you for dinner, store all food, coolers, cooking utensils and toiletries in the trunk of your car or in the special bear-proof lockers, and discard trash in the bear-proof containers provided at campsites and near trailheads.