

Space to roam

A road trip through the Lone Star State offers plenty of highs, discovers **Yolanda Zappaterra**

If it's the big country, so why not have a big car?' suggested the Hertz assistant as I nervously eyeballed the swish pick-up truck/people-carrier hybrids lined up in front of me at Houston airport. It was a good idea, especially as I was planning to cross most of the Lone Star State, a distance of close to 900 miles, from Houston's gleaming skyscrapers to the high desert of western Texas.

Friends were bemused by our decision to start in Houston but, along with the nearby cities of San Antonio and Austin, it offers a great holiday mix. The jaw-dropping splendour of the Space Center Houston is complemented by impressive cultural attractions like the artworks at the Menil Collection and James Turrell's Twilight Epiphany Skyspace at the Rice University Campus, as well as magical architecture such as the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern, a decommissioned underground reservoir from the 1920s.

FIRST RODEO

San Antonio, a cosmopolitan city with a manageable feel, is the place to take in the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo, a Texan institution. Also go for the pretty cypress-lined riverwalk back in town, which meanders up to the San Antonio Museum of Art and, beyond it, the Pearl, a converted brewery that's now home to some of the city's best eateries. North of it, the McNay Art Museum houses a fine painting collection in a 24-room Spanish colonial-revival house. And Spanish colonial history comes to life in the city's five historic missions. The largest, Mission San José, almost fully restored to its original design, evokes 18th-century life within its walls far better than its more famous counterpart, the Alamo.

Last but not least, Austin, with its buzzier, more youthful vibe, is made for nights in iconic music venues like the Continental Club and atmospheric ➤

Chisos Mountains,
Big Bend National
Park, Texas

Photo: Shutterstock/imagobDens

DESTINATIONS

THE US | TEXAS

WHERE TO STAY



The East Austin Hotel

Slick, sexy, youthful and vibrant, just like Austin itself.

Book it: from \$129 per room per night.
eastastinhotel.com

Holland Hotel, Alpine

Fans of 1960s TV series *The High Chaparral* will feel right at home in this elegant colonial-style boutique hotel.

Book it: from \$75 per room per night.
thehollandhotel.texas.com

Paisano, Marfa

A fabulous swimming pool and excellent freshly made breakfast burritos? Enough said.

Book it: from \$169 per room per night.
hotelpaisano.com

Retro Rents, Terlingua

Enjoy some of North America's darkest skies and brightest stars from a firepit outside your vintage trailer.

Book it: from \$135 per trailer per night.
retrorents.com

Fredericksburg Inn & Suites

Great hospitality in comfy rooms set around gardens and a pool.

Book it: from \$135 per room per night.
fredericksburg-inn.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Plywood tributes to the film *Giant* at Marfa; Johnson Space Center, Houston; Austin skyline

PICTURES: Shutterstock/magrophy; Wangkun Jia; f11 photo

spots like the Driskill Bar. Days are best spent at the Blanton Museum of Art, the State Capitol and The Contemporary Austin sculpture garden on the banks of Laguna Gloria. And as day turns to dusk, a Capital Cruise to see the bats on Lady Bird Lake is a real treat.

COWBOY COUNTRY

You could easily spend a fortnight in just those three cities, but west of town, in the Texan Hill Country, the Lady Bird after whom the lake is named is brought to life – along with her husband, Texas schoolteacher-turned-US president Lyndon B Johnson – at the Lyndon B Johnson National Historical Park. Set amid rocky hills tufted with vines, yucca, cactus, juniper and live oak, it's at the heart of Texas's burgeoning wine scene, one that's well served by the quaint Fredericksburg, whose long main street is filled with winsome shops, wineries, ice-cream parlours and cowboy boot stores. It's a good place to invest

“Downtown Marfa is filled with murals depicting classic James Dean poses

in a cowboy hat if, like us, you're making for the arid land and vast skies of western Texas.

The emptiness of the 440-mile drive to Big Bend National Park has a beguiling appeal as the road unwinds west. And with Wi-Fi and mobile reception replaced with wilderness, you literally feel like you're putting the world behind you as you enter the heart of North America's largest desert, the Chihuahuan.

Its scale is a magnet for artists, and around the tiny high-desert town of Marfa (population 1,800), both come together in the Chinati Foundation, an art foundation established on a former army base

by minimalist artist Donald Judd.

Even if you're not into art, the site is unforgettable, with installations by some of the world's leading land artists interacting magnificently with the landscape around them.

And back in town, Marfa's links with the iconic 1956 James Dean film *Giant* have resulted in a charming downtown filled with huge colourful murals depicting classic Dean poses and scenes from the movie. But the most lasting tribute to the film is surely the landscape, which has also starred in *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*.

All were filmed here and around the Big Bend Ranch State and national parks, where more than 1,700 square miles can be explored through a combination of roads, dirt tracks and walking trails. In among them, the old mining town of Terlingua acts as a hub for all-comers. Bikers, hikers, road-trippers and nature nuts alike congregate to sup beer and chew the fat in a great range of restaurants and



TOP: Big Bend National Park ABOVE: Prada Marfa art installation

PICTURES: Shutterstock/B Norris, Jo Hunter

bars, helpfully recommending trails through the parks and even a hop to Mexico, just yards away across the 118-mile green ribbon of the Rio Grande and accessed via a rowing boat ferry from the national park's Boquillas Canyon.

OTHER-WORLDLY

A little farther north, the tiny town of Alpine makes a great overnight stop. Music at the Railroad Blues, history at the appealing Museum of the Big Bend and local beers at modern-day saloon the Ritchey combine to engender the laid-back

ambience of a typically western Texas small town.

We head to El Paso airport via art installation Prada Marfa along a dusty highway with nothing visible in any direction. This scaled-down copy of a Prada store seems to perfectly sum up the alien otherness of western Texas. No one, not even the folks who thrill to the unexplained 'Marfa Lights' seen most nights on the outskirts of town, thinks aliens are linked to Texas, but you can't help feeling that if anywhere in the US were, it would be here. **TW**

BOOK IT

A 14-night Bright Lights and Big Skies package with **America As You Like It**, following this route, costs from £1,660, including flights, accommodation and car hire.

americaasyoulikeit.com

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hertz.co.uk

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