

Big Bend National Park

by Jaimie Hall Bruzenak

A WINTER IN BIG BEND



Veteran full-timer Jaimie Hall Bruzenak and husband George wintered in Big Bend the winter of 2005-06, a fascinating Big Bend desert wonderland in southern Texas. This is her report on why Big Bend is an outstanding destination, not only for RVers but for road trippers of every persuasion who like to adventure far from the beaten path.

Driving into Big Bend National Park for the first time, down the Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive to Castolon, I was struck by the diversity of terrain. The Chisos Mountains, volcanic rock carved by erosion, loomed to the east, Burro Mesa rose to the west.

As I dropped in elevation, alluvial slopes covered by a sea of creosote bush stretched before me. Later, hiking across the Chihuahuan desert floor would reveal many species which could stab, prick or grab, including ocotillo, mesquite, wicked lechuguilla, green and purple prickly pear cacti, and many more.



My destination and living place for the next few months was Castolon. The remains of this border village, an active trading and farming community in the early and mid 1900s, are still evident. La Harmonia Store now houses the small park camp store and visitor center. The drive continues a few miles beyond along the flood plain to an opening in the mountains where the Rio Grande flows through the Santa Elena Canyon through sheer 1500-foot cliffs. The Sierra Ponce Mountains of Mexico are to the left, Texas to the right.

DESERT DIVERSITY



As I've come to know the park, it is the diversity of resources that makes it special. Elevation ranges from a high of 7,832 at Emery Peak to a low of 1,850 feet at Rio Grande Village; animal, plant and bird life are diverse. Visitors can often see road runners, coyotes, javelinas, and tarantulas from their cars. Rio Grande River in Big Bend Lucky ones may see mule deer, bear, or mountain lion. We've caught a glimpse of a kit fox and ringtail cat. More than 450 bird species have been recorded here including two Rio Grande turkeys, regulars in the Cottonwood camp-

ground. Butterflies can be spotted all year round.

This area has national significance as the largest protected area of Chihuahuan Desert topography and ecology in the United States. It has significant geological, paleontological, and architectural resources. Fossilized bones of an alamosaurus and pterodactyls have been discovered in the Javelina Formation. Ancient campsites are evident. We've found flakes of chert and partial arrowheads.



A surprising resource is the clear night skies, third darkest in the national park system. The Milky Way stands bright against dark skies. Amateur astronomers delight in clear viewing. George, who is volunteering here for three months, does a Mariscal mine ruins program on the scale of the universe, with viewing through his 8" Meade telescope when skies permit.



Hikes range from easy walks to desert springs to difficult climbs high in the Chisos. Hot springs lovers can soak at the remains of a bathhouse along the river. We've enjoyed hiking the Chimney trail, the Windows trail to Oak Springs, Dog Canyon and Devil's Den. Many people come to paddle the Rio Grande River. Local outfitters can provide equipment and shuttles.

VISITING THE PARK

Though Big Bend is the eighth largest national park in the lower 48, yearly visitation averages only 300,000. In contrast, the Grand Canyon has more than four million. March and April, when the weather is most pleasant and wild flowers bloom, are busiest. The Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays are also popular and campgrounds can fill. Most spaces in its several campgrounds are on a first-come, first-served basis. Full hookup RV sites in the park are at Rio Grande Village. No generators are allowed at Castolon. RVs longer than 24 feet are not advised to travel up to Chisos Basin. Some primitive back road campsites will accommodate small RVs. Volunteer George Bruzenak at mouth of Santa Elena Canyon

Park headquarters are centrally located at Panther Junction. Most services, except for fuel, are located in the cooler Chisos Basin, open all year. Rio Grande Village and Castolon visitor centers are closed during the summer, though camping is still permitted and camp stores are open.

This is my first visit to Big Bend. It won't be my last.



MORE RESOURCES

Study Butte/Terlingua on Texas State Routes 118 and 170 are both historic ghost towns that now provide small stores, outfitters, restaurants, motels, and RV parks.

(Note: "Study" rhymes with Rudy.)

Starlight Theater in Terlingua: food and music in a restored vintage building. When you go be sure to check out the hand-painted tables and murals.

Phat Caf - Asian Fusion on the Rio Grande (Jaimie's recommendation for New Year's Eve dining - closed summers)

Marathon, on US Highway 90 near the junction with US Highway 385, is a small town about 40 miles north of the park with limited lodging and restaurants and fuel. Rio Grande turkeys in Cottonwood Campground

Big Bend National Park (official National Park Service site) (<http://www.nps.gov/bibe/index.htm>)

Big Bend Natural History Association (<http://www.bigbendbookstore.org/>)

Big Bend Ranch State Park (<http://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/big-bend-ranch>)

Border information: All border crossings within the park are closed.

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