

Lost in the Lone Star State

by Laura Crawford and Russ Roca



Texas is perhaps one of the least likely bicycle touring destinations in the U.S. When imagining Texas, a cyclist's head is filled with the image of angrily speeding drivers in pick-up trucks, and endless days of sandy desert and cactus. We've all heard the myriad negative stereotypes and, due to its sheer immensity, simply crossing the state is a feat in itself. For us, however, riding through the Lone Star State was one of the great highlights of our recent 15-month, 10,000-mile trek around the U.S.

What makes Texas so great is precisely the fact that it is so big and varied. Far West Texas is completely different from the Hill Country, which itself is entirely different from East Texas and the Gulf, and the Plains of the North. Lumping the state into one dry, sandy image does it a great disservice. In this one state, you can experience a wide range of culture, nature, food, and people. Texas also has an incredible network of roads, which means it's easy to find a quiet one that's perfect for cycling. Because Texas is so large, we'd like to offer up our two favorite regions to get you started in planning your own Texas cycling adventure.

Far West Texas

This part of Texas is the dusty hidden gem of the state, sandwiched between New Mexico and Mexico. As one of the most remote parts of America, it is vast, empty, quiet, and full of that desert cowboy imagery. Far West Texas can be a difficult place that will push you and demand awareness and preparation. You will often encounter long, desolate stretches with very few, if any, services. Despite the sometimes challenging conditions, it is also one of the most fascinating corners of the country and will introduce you to some of the friendliest people you'll ever meet.

We entered Far West Texas near Guadalupe (pronounced Guad-a-loop) Mountains National Park (on Highway 180-62), just across the border from Carlsbad, New Mexico. The park features the highest point in Texas (8,751 feet), so it's well worth the stop. Unlike many National Parks with paved roads that traverse the reserve, Guadalupe has no vehicle infrastructure. If you want to explore it, you have to hike in. Even without the hikes, however, you can get a sweeping view of the valley below from the visitor center and campground.

From Guadalupe Mountains National Park, head south on Highway 54 into the small town of Van Horn, along Adventure Cycling's Southern Tier Route. If you're looking for a relaxing refuge from the desert sun and dusty roads, the Hotel El Capitan is very welcoming to bicycle tourists. Renowned architect Henry C. Trost was responsible for the design of the hotel. Trost, a Midwesterner who moved to El Paso in 1903, was heavily influenced by the Chicago School of architecture and designed many other buildings in Far West Texas.

From Van Horn, you have two options, Highway 90 or Interstate 10 (Cycling on interstates in Texas is discouraged but not prohibited.) I-10 has more services along the way, but we chose to follow Highway 90 through the funky little towns of Marfa, Alpine, and Marathon, gaining access to Big Bend National Park. Highway 90 is mostly free of traffic because most travelers take the interstate, which means that you'll have peaceful riding conditions and you'll need to be very self-sufficient (read: carry lots of water!).

From Van Horn you'll ride through the



The rugged west. The roads of Far West Texas provide many a quiet mile for traveling cyclists, like this one in Big Bend National Park.



The evening meal. Laura prepares a meal at one of the many excellent campgrounds in the Texas State Park system.

small town of Valentine. When we passed through, all the shops had been shuttered. All but one public building, the Kay Johnson Library, was closed. This little gem was financed and built by folks in the area and also provided an opportunity to get water. Near Valentine you'll stumble upon the Marfa Prada, an art installation made to look like a Prada retail store, complete with shoes and handbags from the 2005 Prada collection. It was met with mixed reactions

when it opened, including being burgled of all merchandise (the installation no longer has pairs of shoes, just unmatched singles).

In Marfa you'll find a fascinating mix of New York art lovers and dusty Wrangler-wearing ranchers. In the 1970s, the minimalist artist Donald Judd adopted Marfa as his new hometown. Now Marfa is home to the Judd Foundation and the Chinati Foundation, which house world-class

modern art. You'll also find some of the best pizza in the country at the Pizza Foundation and a "hotel" where you can stay in refurbished trailers or a teepee (El Cosmico).

Next along Highway 90 is Alpine, the largest town in the area. Alpine is home to an Amtrak station, a fantastic independent bookstore, and the annual Cowboy Poetry Festival. It is also the best place to stock up before heading into Big Bend.

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Shoppers delight. Funky shops adorn Far West Texas, so plan on stocking up on plenty of what the Lone Star state has to offer.

Just beyond Alpine is the tiny town of Marathon, centered around an Old West-style Main Street. You'll now find art galleries, the Gage Hotel, and incredible food and hospitality. There is even a hostel made entirely from papercrete (a construction method that utilizes paper and clay), where you can stay free if you're bike touring.

To head into Big Bend from Alpine, ride south along Highway 118. It's approximately 80 miles, and there are very few oppor-

tunities to stop for the night along the way. We found ourselves at Cowhead Ranch, a small replica of a western town run by a warm-hearted cowboy named Chris, who hand-built the plywood and corrugated steel structures to create accommodations for passing travelers. Cowhead has a small bathhouse with on-demand hot water and a saloon with wireless internet!

Continuing on Highway 118 will take you to Study Butte-Terlingua. Head west

just a few miles on FM170 into Terlingua Ghost Town to soak up some true local color. It's traditional to have a drink on The Porch while watching the sun set against the mountains. Locals and travelers mingle for impromptu jam sessions and storytelling. Plenty of lodging is nearby, including the Terlingua Camping Hostel, which has an old school bus that has been converted into a kitchen/lounge.

For the hearty cyclist, we recommend a ride into Big Bend National Park and camping/lodging in Chisos Basin. But be prepared for a challenge. From the main road, it's a five-mile, 2,100-foot climb into Chisos Basin. Although it's tough to get to, it's an amazing place to hike and camp, nestled in a ring of mountains.

Far West Texas is full of experiences that we guarantee you will not find anywhere else. But a word of caution, conditions can be very long, so plan ahead and be sure you always carry extra food and water.

The Hill Country & North-Central Texas
The Hill Country is roughly located in the middle of the state and is anchored on the east by the capital city of Austin.



You'll find quaint towns with German and Scandinavian heritage, old stone farmhouses, incredible wildflower blooms during the spring, and plenty of hills to climb. Just to the north of the Hill Country, you'll find yourself surrounded by the rolling plains of north-central Texas. This is a different Texas than most of us imagine. It's lush and green in the spring, peppered with lakes, and replete with small towns centered around a courthouse square.

We entered Hill Country after months in the desert and were immediately struck by the green trees and rushing rivers. After a long stay in Austin (an amazingly bicycle-friendly city), we headed west through the Hill Country on a long and roundabout ride to Fort Worth. Without realizing it, we had timed our trip through the Hill Country at the peak of the wildflower bloom (in mid-April). For a true Hill Country experience, we suggest you do the same. It's an amazing experience to soar down a country road and breathe in the sweet fragrance of thousands of bluebonnets, the Texas state flower.

Our rambles through the Hill Country were punctuated by stops at the numerous state parks throughout the region. Texas



Prada Marfa. A sculpture by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset outside Valentine, Texas.

has an incredible network of these gems with fantastic camping facilities, so we highly suggest taking advantage of them. A few of our favorites, Pedernales Falls, Inks Lake, and Enchanted Rock, are accessible by small back roads. One of the highlights was climbing up to the top of Enchanted Rock, one of the largest batholiths in the U.S. (Half Dome in Yosemite is another well-

known batholith formation). The Hill Country also boasts a number of great towns to explore. West of Austin, you'll find Fredericksburg and Kerrville, complete with myriad restaurants, museums, and shops. Just south of Fredericksburg, and way off the beaten path, you'll find a very small town with a big reputation — Luckenbach. The town



CASEY GREENE



Different altogether. The Hill Country is lush and green compared to West Texas.

was made famous by country music artists Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson in a song of the same name that harkens back to a simpler life. In Luckenbach we stumbled onto the annual Texas Hat Festival and bought a couple of hat pins with the Texas star for our panniers.

South of Austin, you'll find Gruene, New Braunfels, and Lockhart. Gruene Hall is the oldest dance hall in Texas and is still a thriving anchor of the community. Stay for a show or simply pop in for a beer and a slice of history. On a hot summer day, make time for a swim in the nearby Guadalupe River.

Lockhart is known as the barbecue capital of Texas and has three famous establishments vying for supremacy: Kreutz's, Smitty's, and Black's. We flipped a coin and chose Smitty's, located downtown. The brick walls are black with soot, and the smell of smoked meat hangs permanently in the air. In Texas barbecue is synonymous with seasoned and expertly smoked beef brisket. You buy it by the pound, and your choice of sides includes either Wonder bread or saltine crackers. Texas barbecue traditionalists will tell you that good brisket doesn't need any sauce and good meat should stand on its own. Despite that, many establishments are acceding to the demands of the masses, and sauces are reluctantly offered.

One of our favorite parts of exploring the Hill Country by bicycle was that it's a popular place for cyclists. You'll no doubt pass others on bikes enjoying the hills and scenery, and they're often happy to share their favorite routes. When we were touring through the area, we even ran into an Adventure Cycling-led group at Pedernales State Park. Having that many cyclists in an area also means that car drivers are more aware and accommodating.

Heading north you begin to leave Hill Country and start to enter the prairies and lakes region. The hills gradually become less severe, and the bluebonnets are replaced by fields of wild grass. In the small town of Glen Rose, you'll find a small and revitalized courthouse square, a historical museum, and a small bakery serving delicious homemade pie. Also nearby is Solavaca, a private ranch now open to mountain biking. After using a bike to repair holes in his fence, the owner invited friends to ride on his property and has since begun hosting organized races. Camping is allowed on a limited basis and requires advance notification.

Nearby Granbury is also centered around a revitalized courthouse square and offers shops, restaurants, galleries, and museums that will entice you to take a break. If you're staying the night, take advantage of the shuttle system. You can leave your bike in the room and let the shuttle take you to the town center and back.

In our rambling travels, we spent three months exploring Texas and we were continually delighted and impressed. Our experiences challenged our preconceived notions of the Lone Star State. Not only did we meet friendly people, see beautiful scenery, and eat delicious local foods, but the network of farm-to-market roads meant that we could crisscross the state without dealing with much traffic. Texas is so large that it's tempting to race through it, just to get across. For the bike tourist who prefers to meander and explore, Texas offers a multitude of touring options, from challenging cycling to epicurean delights. **AC**

Russ Roca and Laura Crawford are doing what they've always wanted to do — an open-ended bicycle tour — and they've recently incorporated Brompton folding bikes and trains into their travels. You can find out more about them at pathlesspedaled.com.

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