

BORDERLINE CRAZY

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GLEN ABBOTT



“OFF THE BEATEN PATH” ONLY BEGINS TO DESCRIBE THE TINY WEST TEXAS TOWNS OF MARFA AND TERLINGUA. “OFFBEAT” COMES TO MIND, AS WELL, BUT PERHAPS “DOWNRIGHT WEIRD” WORKS BEST.



Marfa and Terlingua are lonely islands in the mountainous high desert of West Texas, where rattlesnakes undoubtedly outnumber the human population. Little more than 100 miles separate the two, but both are a solid day’s drive (albeit a rather rapid one, given the state’s maximum speed limit of 85 mph in some places) from the big cities of Dallas or Houston.

Despite their relative geographic proximity, the two towns are practically polar opposites. United in quirkiness, divided in demeanor.

Not surprisingly, denizens of each tend to look down on the other. In Marfa, the desk clerk at my hotel laughingly described Terlingua as “the world’s largest outdoor insane asylum,” a description that Terlinguans actually seem to embrace.

Terlinguans, in turn, tend to regard Marfans as big-city snobs. “Marfa is high art, kind of international, and really focused on itself,” according to one resident. “While Terlingua is kind of like the center of this sort of energetic vortex.”

True, the vibe in Marfa tends toward artsy and hip – a place where cowboys

and coolsters coincide. Whereas Terlingua is more like the untamed Wild West, attracting its fair share of oddballs and quirky characters, equally divided among those running away from something and those seeking whereabouts unknown. Regardless, both towns prove that in a state as big as Texas, there’s plenty of weird to go around.

GOING NOWHERE, FAST.

Speeding east from El Paso on I-10, my Road Glide® Ultra thundered contentedly in top gear, its 103 cubic inches pacing perfectly with the posted 80-mph speed limit. The big bike’s shark-nosed, frame-mounted fairing split the hot desert air; its attention-getting Big Blue Pearl metallic paint danced in the sunlight.

At Van Horn, I left the interstate for the 70-mile ride to Marfa on U.S. 90, among the loneliest stretches of blacktop you’re likely to encounter anywhere. Mile after mile of high Chihuahuan Desert, with the Van Horn and Sierra Vieja mountain »

ranges looming off to the west. Only one town punctuates the journey: Valentine, population barely more than 100 souls, is the only incorporated township in the entire 2,000 square-mile Jeff Davis County.

Outside Valentine, I zoomed past a squat structure in the middle of an isolated stretch of desert highway. It's possible – however unlikely – that I may have been slightly exceeding the posted speed limit on that lonely road, but something about what I had just seen jarred a glimmer of recognition in the nether regions of my mind. I quickly braked and rode back for a closer look at Prada of Marfa. So read the building's sign, anyway.

It's not a real Prada store, and it's not really in Marfa, but it sure looks authentic, with Prada shoes and handbags on display behind plate-glass windows. Unveiled in 2005, it's actually a “pop architectural land art project,” according to a description on the Atlas Obscura website (www.atlasobscura.com). The artists intended it as commentary on the materialism of Western culture.

Riding a little farther down the road, a white unmarked tethered dirigible hovered low over the desert. I seriously wondered for a moment whether it was another art installation. I found out later it's a “tethered aerostat” operated by the Department of Defense – a drug blimp, if you will – providing unmanned low-level radar surveillance for the interdiction of cross-border traffickers.

Slightly surreal yet a perfect introduction to Marfa.

MYSTERIOUS MARFA

Marfa, Texas, population 2,000, was established in 1883 as a water stop on the railroad line, supposedly named after a character in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel by Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

For most of its life, Marfa was a sleepy cattle ranching town, until Hollywood came a-callin' in the 1950s. The 1956 epic drama *Giant* brought Hollywood A-listers Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor, and James Dean to the remote town, and it made quite an impression on the locals.

“We got to talk with James Dean,” remembers Marfa barber Mateo Quintana, a teenager at the time. “He used to hang around town; there was a leather goods store there. He'd take a bullwhip, and he started popping it there in the alley. We went over, and he'd throw that whip around our feet,” he said, chuckling at the memory.

More recently, *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood* filmed in Marfa. Local bank president Chip Love had a small role in *No Country*, speaking one line before getting shot by star Javier Bardem.

Although Love is part of “Old Marfa” (his family's roots here date back to the 1800s), he readily embraces the new. “Old Marfa was more of a traditional West Texas small town,” he explained. “Friday night football and agriculture was the dominant culture. And New Marfa, it's definitely slanted toward the arts. A lot of artists, a lot of cultural activities, lots of music, food has improved, and quality of life, in my perspective, has gone way up.”

Pretty exciting stuff for the middle of nowhere, you'd think. My mistake, however: “It's in the middle of everywhere, actually,” corrected John Garcia, newspaper reporter for the *Big Bend Sentinel*. “That's how I look at it.”

The arts community discovered Marfa in 1971 with the arrival of New York minimalist artist Donald Judd, who began buying up property for his studios and artwork. One of Judd's best-known pieces consists of a series of 15 giant concrete boxes, installed in a Marfa field between 1980 and 1984.

After Judd, the arts community gravitated here in droves, resulting in the diverse cowboy/hipster equation that defines Marfa life. “We get along with the artists that came in, but we also get along with the cowboys that have been here for generations,” said Marfa native Ellen Melvin, who works at the Marfa



“[TERLINGUA] IT'S A VERY COMMUNAL, MAGICAL PLACE. I THINK IT'S ONE OF THE MOST MAGICAL PLACES ON THE PLANET.”



Visitor Center. “We coexist because we're friendly, and we like people.”

Marfa after dark means a must-see visit to the Marfa Mystery Lights. For many years, people have reported seeing mysterious lights hovering or flickering in the distant Chinati Mountains or over the desert. In response to the interest, the city constructed a modern “viewing station” several miles east of town, providing a front-row seat to the nightly phenomena.

At twilight, I rode out to the viewing area, taking my place among a growing group of truth-seekers waiting for the show to begin. Lights twinkled in the distance as the evening skies darkened. To me, they looked exactly like flickering car headlights; no shining orbs here. But hey, it's Marfa, it's mysterious, and it's free, so why not?

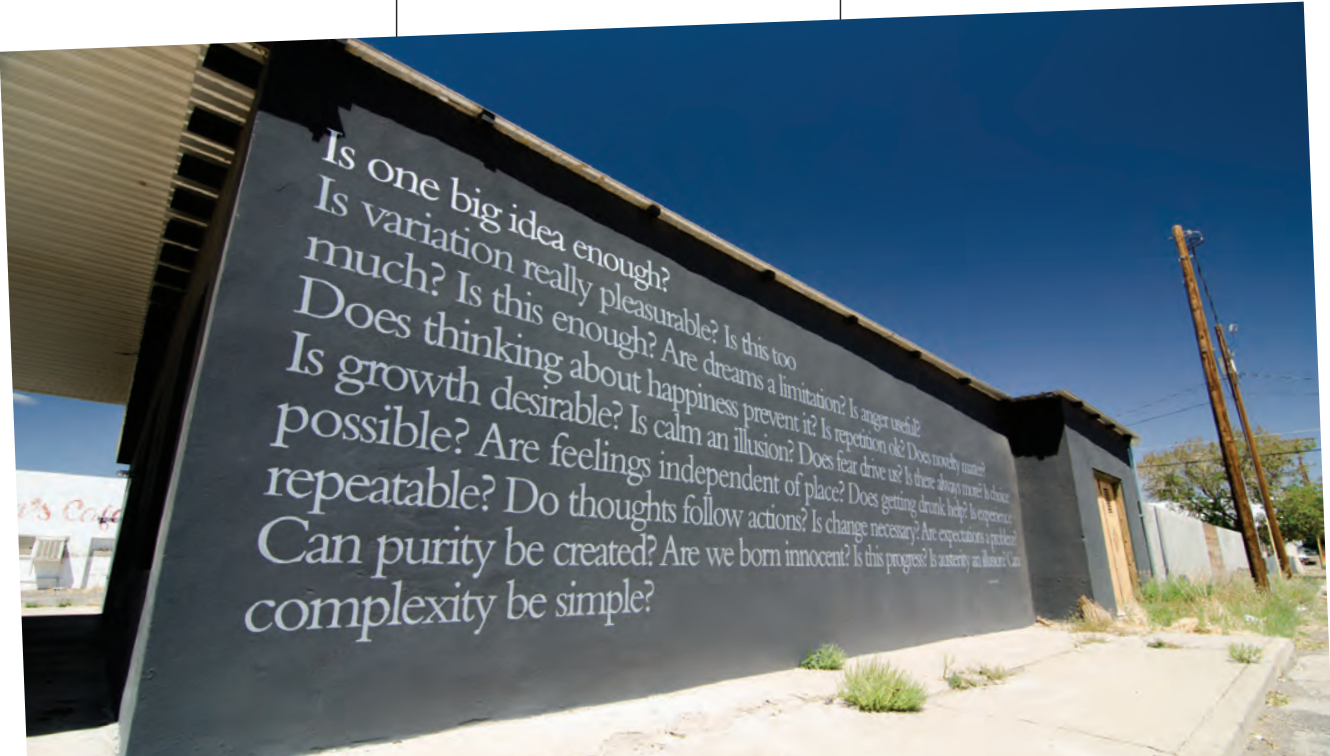
Heading back to town for a different kind of Marfa-after-dark experience, I parked at the Hotel Paisano (a wonderful historic hotel where the cast and crew of *Giant* stayed in 1956) and walked a couple of blocks to Padre's, a bar housed in a one-time funeral home. Over an ice-cold brew, I listened to a rockin' energetic duo called SIRSY, a touring indie band from upstate New York. Kicking ass and taking names, they wowed the small Thursday-night crowd. “We're described as soulful, indie pop that rocks,” explained drummer and vocalist Melanie Krahmer. It was the first time in Marfa for Krahmer and guitarist Rich Libutti, but not the last, they said. “It's a cool, artsy little community, seemingly

dropped in the middle of nowhere,” commented Libutti. “I mean, it's not what I expected; there's not one person here with a cowboy hat,” he laughed.

TERLINGUA, ISLAND OF MISFIT TOYS

On the road from Marfa to Terlingua early the next morning, I rode 125 absolutely stunning and blissful miles of nothingness, a portion of which traces the Mexican border along the Rio Grande.

At Terlingua, I pulled into the ghost »



town proper, site of the ruins of a bygone mining community. Ironically, the “ghost town” is where most of the 60 or so residents live, scenically scattered among the ruins.

Terlingua thrived in the late 1800s with the discovery of cinnabar, from which mercury, or quicksilver, is derived. A couple thousand miners and their families lived and worked here until the quicksilver supply dried up in the early 1940s, and the town’s stone and adobe structures began their inevitable decline back to desert. Terlingua’s rebirth began in the 1960s, as tourists and wandering hippies rediscovered the remote desert town. Most people today know Terlingua for its annual chili cookoff, held the first week of November.

Walking amongst Terlingua’s ruins and Boot Hill Cemetery, you can almost feel the presence of the early prospectors and imagine what their lives were like. But it’s tourism, not mercury, that feeds the town today, which has attracted a diverse collection of locals.

“You’ve got everyone from folks who didn’t finish grade school, to Ph.D. scientists and writers, and amazing musicians and artists,” said Denese Jones, manager of Terlingua’s El Dorado Hotel and High Sierra Bar and Grill. Actually, Denese is the Ph.D. scientist she refers to; she was drawn to Terlingua four years ago after retiring from the National Institutes of Health. “I think there’s something here that heals people,” she explains. “Broken people. I call Terlingua ‘Neverland’ or the ‘Island of Misfit Toys.’”

One of those misfit toys is certainly Doug Blackmon, or “Dr. Doug,” as he calls himself. If he’d been a prospector in Terlingua during its mining heyday, he’d undoubtedly have been clutching a whiskey bottle in one hand and a pickax in the other. Today, however, he carries a bottle of cheap wine and a walking stick. He runs a website, “Dr. Doug’s Mental Health Clinic” (www.drdougs.com), in which he prescribes “liquid therapy”

for his patients. His portrait there is captioned, “Dr. Doug, Borderline Mental Therapist.”

“There are a lot of characters here, so to speak,” he admits with a laugh. “And I guess I consider myself one of ‘em.” He also considers Terlingua and Marfa to be as different as night and day. “Well, Marfa has more artists. Plus they have the Marfa lights, and we don’t, which is a good thing. We don’t want UFOs flying all over the place, wildly! Down here, hell, there’s more things to do than there is in Houston, Texas,” he exclaimed, drawing out the word “Texas” in an exaggerated drawl. “We have satellite communications, we have computers. Hell, we’re into NASA and all that stuff. As a matter of fact we have TASA here – the Terlingua Aeronautics and Space Administration!”

There is something undeniably magical about the place. From the porch of the Terlingua Trading Company, you can sip a cold beer and watch the sunset illuminate the distant Chisos Mountains, with Terlingua’s ruins in the foreground bathed in golden light. Spend some time chatting with characters like Dr. Doug or the musician who said he had previously made his living smuggling “contraband” across the nearby Mexican border or

the writer from New Orleans who came to finish his latest book. Trust me, you won’t want to leave.

“Terlingua is just a wild and free land of outlaws and music, and you can’t get by here without an open heart,” a local woman explained. “It’s a very communal, magical place. I think it’s one of the most magical places on the planet.”

“Terlingua’s paradise,” echoed Denese, the hotel manager. “Paradise in the Chihuahuan Desert. We always say you don’t choose Terlingua, it chooses you. Something resonates here with a lot of people.”

Unforgettable scenery, wide-open spaces, lonely roads, and great riding. With a cast of characters to match any Hollywood movie, you’ve got all the fixins for a memorable journey, from Marfa to Terlingua and all points between.

Just be sure to watch for UFOs on your way down. **HOG**

For additional photographs of Marfa and Terlingua, and Glen Abbott’s Terlingua video, download the tablet edition of *HOG* 022.



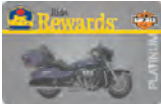
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