

Why you should visit Big Bend National Park, a natural paradise in West Texas

Hiking, canoeing, bird-watching and camping under starry skies are all part of the splendor at this Texas gem.

By [Emily Price](#), Special to Chron Aug 27, 2023



Big Bend National Park Camille Sauers/MySA

Big Bend National Park is one of the most popular vacation spots in all of Texas, welcoming more than [500,000 visitors](#) from around the world each year. Often referred to as [Texas' Gift to the Nation](#), the park is known for its storied past and robust culture.

Located in West Texas near the Mexican border, the park is the [largest protected area](#) of [Chihuahuan Desert topography](#) and ecology in the U.S. Visitors can take in the history of the park through [numerous archeological sites](#) dating back over 8,000 years and even "walk" in the footsteps of the park's original inhabitants by driving along [The Comanche Trail](#). The park also has hiking trails for all skill levels, amazing views, access to the Rio Grande River, a hearty bird and wildlife population and [camping options](#) for everyone from RV owners to backpackers.

If you're planning a visit Big Bend National Park, keep reading for everything to know about the park and what to expect during your visit.



Big Bend National Park in Texas. David Hensley/Getty Images

What is the best time of year to visit Big Bend National Park?

Traditionally, fall and spring are the best times to visit Big Bend National Park. The reason? Weather.

Texas can get exceptionally hot in the summer months (May-September), which can make [hiking in Big Bend National Park](#) a dangerous proposition. Several [people have died hiking the park's trails](#) on exceptionally hot days. If you do plan on visiting during the summer, you'll want to make sure you're prepared with plenty of water. Additionally, the park advises hikers to avoid hiking the trails entirely in the afternoons, when temperatures are at their highest.

[October through April](#) is considered peak season at Big Bend, and March tends to be one of the most popular months for people to visit—partly due to mild temperatures that make it easier to enjoy the park's numerous trails. March is also spring break for many students, which can [make the park a bit more crowded](#).

If you want milder temperatures with fewer crowds, autumn is also a popular season for visiting Big Bend. However, there tends to be more rain in the park during the autumn than in the spring, so your hike has a stronger chance of getting rained out.



Stunning geologic rock feature in Big Bend National Park. Dean Fikar/Getty Images

How much does it cost to visit Big Bend National Park?

Like most National Parks, there's a [fee to enter Big Bend National Park](#), but no reservations are required. No cash is accepted; only credit or debit cards may be used to pay the entrance fee.

At the time of this writing, an entrance pass for a single vehicle is \$30 and allows any private, non-commercial vehicle with seating for 15 or less entrance into the park for seven days. Motorcyclists can purchase a seven-day pass for \$25, and those arriving at the park on foot or bicycle can secure a seven-day pass for \$15.

School groups can apply for an academic fee waiver for entrance. If you're local and anticipate visiting the park often, you can also secure an annual pass for \$55, which gives you and anyone in your vehicle access to the park all year.

There are also a few free entrance days at the park to put on your calendar: Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the first day of National Park Week, The Great Outdoors Act Day, National Public Lands Day and Veterans Day.



A classic view of The Window in the Chisos Mountains in Big Bend National Park. Deb Snelson/Getty Images

The best things to do in Big Bend National Park

Hit the hiking trails

Big Bend National Park [offers over 150 miles of hiking trails](#), with options for everyone from novice hikers who want to go on a casual stroll, to experienced backpackers hoping for a multi-day affair.

Experienced hikers will love checking out [Chisos Basin](#). There are several different hiking trails in the area that vary in difficulty; however, many of them are better suited to experienced hikers rather than amateurs. The Emory Peak Trail, for instance, is over 10 miles long and can take between five and seven hours to complete. At the trail summit, you'll end up at the highest point in the Chisos Mountains, where you can take in amazing views of the entire park.

Go bird-watching

Big Bend is also [a popular destination for bird-watching](#) with [450 different species of birds](#) reported by curious onlookers. Only 56 of those species live in the park year-round; the others are known to frequent the park at specific times of the year.

Take the scenic route

The [Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive](#) is one of the best things to do in Big Bend National Park. It's also one of the easiest—you don't even need to get out of your car. The drive starts near the park's Maverick entrance and continues for 30 miles to Santa Elena Canyon. If you want to exit your vehicle, there are

lots of short hiking trails along the drive, as well as scenic overlooks such as the iconic [Mule Ears Overlook](#), where you can snap a few pics for the 'gram.



Canoeing in Big Bend National Park. Kanokwalee Pusitanun/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Go canoeing

Another great way to experience a lot of what Big Bend National Park has to offer at once is by canoeing in Santa Elena Canyon. [Big Bend River Tours](#) offers all-day, two-person canoe trips that include lunch and the opportunity to explore some areas you might not be able to access any other way. What you see on the trip can vary depending on the time of year you visit and the [water levels in the river](#). You can also [set out on your own on the river](#), provided you obtain a permit from the park and follow all river use regulations.



Camping under a starry night sky in Big Bend National Park, Texas. Photo by Justin Jensen. www.just/Getty Images

Camping at Big Bend National Park

[Camping](#) can be a fun way to experience Big Bend National Park, complete with stellar [stargazing](#) at some of the darkest night skies in the nation. The park has four on-site campgrounds, all of which require reservations in advance. Three of the campgrounds are operated by the National Park Service and are available for tent camping, and a fourth campsite, Concession Campground, is operated by Aramark and offers 25 RV spots with full hookups.

In the likely event that you want to camp and the park's campgrounds are full, there are also several [camping options nearby but outside the park](#).

Big Bend also allows backcountry camping for those seeking an adventure and more solitude. A permit is required for backcountry camping and may be acquired through Recreation.gov for most campsites. Desert backpacking and primitive roadside sites along [Maverick Road](#) and remote [River Road](#) and [Old Ore Road](#) have to be obtained in person at the park's visitor center.

For visitors who don't want to camp but still want to stay inside the park, the [Chisos Mountains Lodge](#) offers a variety of different rooms and cottages for rent, as well as a dining room, camp store and gift shop.

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