

Lone star

Big, rugged and handsome – it was the landscape that was the hero of all those great cowboy films. **Lee Mannion** saddles up in Big Bend National Park, Texas

If my dad spotted a Western in the television schedules, back when there were only four channels, it always put him in a good mood. Aged eight, I was too fidgety to have the patience to find out why some guy in a cowboy hat was shooting at some other guy. It was only after I'd grown up and travelled along Route 66, through New Mexico and Arizona, that I began to see the beauty and appeal of those landscapes, imprinted on my memory by Dad's addiction to TV-Westerns. Southwest USA, I discovered, offered the space, the solitude, the minimalism and the vastness I craved.

Westerns are full of nomadic wanderers and there is no greater terrain for a modern wanderer than Big Bend in Texas. Here was where the *original* cowboys came from. Named after the sudden change in direction made by the Rio Grande, its first settlers were Mexican 'vaqueros' (Spanish for cowboys), who raised cattle in the 1830s and were renowned for their horsemanship. Then, in 1944, the name was officially applied to the 300,000-hectare Big Bend National Park, the southern boundary of which is formed by the river. It's the land cowboy dreams are made of, and I'm going to put on a Stetson, ride out into the epic plains,

and shoot me some guns – just like one of the cowboys in Dad's films.

First stop, the Big Bend Saddlery in tiny Alpine (motto: 'Ranch gear, cowboy supplies, and products for the Western at heart'). It's like walking into a props store for every John Wayne movie ever made, a place that brings out the inner gaucho in all of us. Every bit of space is filled with boots, bridles, saddles and spurs; but with temperatures in the mid-thirties, it's a hat I really need, because I don't want the Texas heat to make me faint like some lily-livered limey. A Stetson seems the obvious choice: if it's good enough for the locals, I reason, it's good enough for an outsider like me. ▶

Big country:
the vast expanse of the
Big Bend National Park
with a soaptree yucca in
the foreground. On the
horizon, the Chisos
mountain range

'Stetsons are only for tourists,' the lady in the shop informs me, with a bemused shake of her head, 'and we don't sell 'em.' Moments later, I walk out of there with my thumbs hooked in my belt and a brand new Atwood Palm leaf hat.

Back on the road, I head for the Gage Hotel on the edge of Marathon, the town that proclaims itself 'gateway to Big Bend'. With its Lone Star emblazoned proudly over the entrance, and wooden shutters and cattle skulls dotted around, the hotel embodies Texan hospitality. That it sits beside a track taking freight trains slowly through the desert, each occasionally emitting that harmonica-like horn that sounds just like 'America', only makes it all the more attractive to me.

Rested and fed, I enter Big Bend next morning. And over the next 200km my spirit soars, and I have to admit I experience a profound feeling of beatific contentment. There are certain landscapes that will do that to you. For someone who lives in a one-bedroom flat in a busy city, the overriding sensation is of *freedom*. Cotton-wool cumulus clouds in the vast expanse of sky create island-sized shadows against the Chihuahuan desert. Sagebrush and strange, reedy-looking ocotillo flowers line the route. I am a flea in this giant place. There are clear 200km views in

every direction, some to far-off mountain ranges. One of which, the Chisos, appears as little more than a bump on the horizon, even though its peaks are more than 2,000m high.

Lajitas, my next stop and my Big Bend base for the next few days, is probably the closest you can get to the Rio Grande without getting your feet wet. It's not a town but 'an unincorporated community' – which means there ain't much there. It used to have a beer-drinking goat as a mayor, which gives you some indication of the locals' regard for authority.

Waiting for me in Lajitas – resplendent in check shirt, cowboy hat, jeans and boots – is Kim 'OK' Estes, an expert horse-trainer who works at Lajitas's only hotel. He radiates Southern courtesy while also giving the distinct impression he wouldn't take any shit. In my book, OK is a cowboy – he's been 'cutting' horses for four decades. Cutting was a sport that grew from the cowboys' skill in getting a horse to drive a cow in any given direction. This basically means that OK can make a horse turn this way or that, accelerate, slow down or stop on a dime, with little more than a twitch of his heels or tap on his saddle. I reckon on OK being a pretty good shot, too – I've seen his barbary sheep trophy hanging on the wall



Horse play: on the Texas highway. Opposite, cattle ranchers in Marathon; Mariscal Canyon, in the heart of 'the bend' – canoe or kayak through it

ADVENTURE TRAVEL WITHOUT LIMITS

Explore Tailormade - our bespoke service - is all about creating your perfect holiday. Your family, friends or just you - with Tailormade Explore you travel exactly the way you want to.

Whether it's an individual getaway, the perfect honeymoon or a family holiday, our dedicated team will create an original holiday just for you, including those special touches you want to add to make your trip perfect – maybe a local homestay or a meal under a blanket of stars.

With the freedom to create the adventure of your dreams to a budget which suits, we can guide you into the heart of a range of exotic countries including Cuba, Peru, Egypt and Thailand.

To start planning your perfect holiday

Call 0844 875 1890

www.explore.co.uk/tailormade

EXPLORE!
Tailormade

THE EXPERTS IN TAILORMADE ADVENTURES

Lajitas used to have a beer-drinking goat as mayor, which maybe gives you some idea of the locals' regard for authority

at the hotel in Lajitas. A master-horseman and a sure-shot with a gun? Oh, he's a cowboy alright.

At the shooting range OK introduces me to a single-action pistol, a lever-action rifle and a coach gun. 'You ever heard the expression "ride shotgun?"' he asks. I nod. 'This is the reason,' he says, holding up a double-barrelled rifle. 'The guys sitting alongside the driver of the stagecoach used them against robbers.'

We start with the revolver and I shoot .45 long Colt bullets. 'The one that won the West,' nods OK. Try as I might to be a bleeding-heart liberal, it's hard to deny the buzz that comes from shooting a gun. Aiming at metal targets in the scrub, I can hear alternate pings and scuffs as I occasionally hit a target. Then it's on to the shotguns. Though I bury the gun as much as I can in my shoulder, the recoil still shakes me. Two days later, a purple mark will reveal how tough a cowboy I really am.

Next morning I walk out at 8am and the first thing I see is a turkey vulture perched on a rock beside the highway,

wings splayed to warm itself in the first rays of the day. The mercury is set to reach 35°C this afternoon and I'm glad I bought the hat back in Alpine. Matching it as well as I can with a denim cowboy shirt and jeans, I pretty much look the part (save for the pasty English complexion).

Which is good, because today I'm riding. My host at Lajitas stables, Janelle, instructs me how to mount my horse and I manage it without falling off. We head into the plains and then ascend. The desert is rocky and bone-dry, but somehow the horse finds patches of green and stops to eat. I know that I've got to show him who's boss and, eventually, I get used to giving him a dig in the flanks with my heels. After an hour or so we arrive at the top of Contrabando Mesa, and all of a sudden we are looking over the Rio Grande to Mexico. The muddy brown river twists through the desert and I look over countless miles of vista, the line of the horizon irregular with craggy mesas and terracotta hills of another country. It feels wonderful.

Just like I'm a cowboy in a Western. ■

Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

Midland is the nearest airport to Big Bend National Park. **United** (0845 844 4777, www.unitedairlines.co.uk) flies there from Heathrow, via Houston, from £517 return. **Continental Airlines** (0845 607 6760, www.continental.com) flies to Houston from £452; a further flight to Midland starts at £98. **Hertz** (0870 844 8844, www.hertz.co.uk) has seven days' car hire from Midland airport, from £146.

WHERE TO STAY

The Gage Hotel, Marathon (00 1 432 386 4205, www.gagehotel.com); doubles from £121, room only). **The Lajitas Golf Resort and Spa** (00 1 800 245 9757, www.lajitasgolfresort.com); doubles from £120, room only). It arranges OK's shooting lessons (£63pp).

GO PACKAGED

America As You Like It (020 8742 8299, www.americaasyoulikeit.com) has a seven-night fly-drive to Big Bend, including return flights via Houston to Midland, seven days' car hire, and accommodation at the Gage and Lajitas Resort from £1,115pp.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Lajitas Stables (www.lajitasstables.com) has rides from £43. See also www.traveltext.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANOM, GETTY



ONLY IN GEORGIA... do eager parents flock to Babyland Hospital, where Cabbage Patch Kids (yes, the toy) are 'born' and staff are 'doctors'