

THE BEST LITTLE SMALL TOWN IN TEXAS



Marfa remains a quintessential West Texas town, despite celebrated artists such as the late Donald Judd utilizing the ethereal landscape as a canvas



AS AN UNLIKELY CULTURAL HAVEN,
THE BUZZ FOR MARFA KEEPS GROWING.
THANKFULLY, THE TOWN DOES NOT

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When I was mapping out a cross-country drive from Los Angeles to Miami, there was one place I wanted to stop more than any other:

Marfa. I'd heard many stories about this West Texas town, which once served as a railroad water stop and Army installation before the artist Donald Judd landed here in the 1970s, later founding the Chinati Foundation art museum and transforming Marfa into a well-spring of culture and ideas.

As I approached the town on a desolate stretch of Highway 90, beneath one of those only-in-Texas sunsets, I happened across the magnificently incongruous *Prada Marfa*, a standalone faux boutique installed here in 2005 by Scandinavian artists Elmgreen and Dragset. The work has become the town's unofficial calling card—despite the fact it's located 35 miles from Marfa, on the far side of Valentine, another itty-bitty dot on the vast Texas map. I pulled over, window-shopped, snapped a selfie and continued onward to the actual Marfa.

With a peachy courthouse and a lone stoplight at its center, Marfa (population 2,424) looks like a good ol' American roadside oasis dreamed up by Hollywood. George Stevens directed the 1956 classic film *Giant* here. More recently, celebrities such as Beyoncé, Natalie Portman and Robert Pattinson have arrived to absorb the atmosphere. Marfa was namedropped last year in the moody film *Nocturnal Animals* with Amy Adams and Jake Gyllenhaal, and has been cast as the setting of the Amazon comedy *I Love Dick* starring Kathryn Hahn and Kevin Bacon.

Unlike other oh-so-hot destinations, the influx of artists, celebrities, foodies and sundry jetsetters has not made Marfa any less of a small town. You can't fly directly in unless you charter a private plane or helicopter. El Paso is three hours away. The nearest Walmart is an hour and a half drive. The locals warn visitors that the town's restaurants—which range from the chic Stellina to kitschy New Foodsharkland—occasionally run out of food. And the shops that are here often don't ▶



Top: The former Palace Theater in downtown Marfa, closed since the 1970s
Bottom: Robert Irwin's light-infused art installation, untitled (dawn to dusk), opened last year

When superstar Beyoncé and sister Solange visited Marfa in 2013, the entertainers stayed in one of the colorful retro trailers spread across the 18-acre El Cosmico campground



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bother to open on Mondays or Tuesdays, even if the sign on the door says otherwise.

“People need a good excuse to come to Marfa—it’s a daunting place to visit,” says Nicki Ittner, a bubbly transplant from Houston who moved here from Portland, Oregon. “You don’t just stumble on Marfa.”

Luckily, the town hosts several events that justify the journey here—among them are the Marfa Film Festival in July, and the Trans-Pecos Festival of Music + Love, held on the grounds of the kooky El Cosmico campground in September.

For her part, Ittner produces the annual Marfa Myths music festival, an intimate and lovingly curated event that typically attracts around 800 to 1,000 visitors. *Billboard* asked if

it’s the “anti-Coachella,” referring to the blockbuster festival held each year in Southern California. Next month’s lineup has psychedelic legend Roky Erickson; an afternoon performance by Pharoah Sanders; and a mash-up concert starring folksy songstress Weyes Blood and pop artist Perfume Genius.

But getting to Marfa is only half the challenge—there is a handful of lodging options >



Marfa's population peaked at 5,000 in the 1940s when ranching and military operations were more prevalent. Today, about 2,000 residents call the quaint West Texas town home



here, but these can sell out quickly during events. On my first night, I check into the Hotel Paisano, a 1930s building peppered with touches like Mexican made tiles and mounted buffalo heads. It's famously where the cast and crew of *Giant* bunked during production. The hotel has since turned the rooms where the stars stayed into special suites. Rock Hudson's is the best. It's outfitted with a living room, raised bedroom, green brick fireplace, rooftop patio and framed portrait of the actor.

The next day, I grab the best breakfast burrito of my life at Marfa Burrito, which is actually the home of a woman named Ramona who only speaks Spanish. Then, I spend a few hours communing with some of Donald Judd's sculptures, which include 15 colossal hollow concrete blocks laid out on a

quarter-mile patch of land and 100 shimmering aluminum boxes housed inside a pair of cavernous old artillery sheds. I'm struck by how effortlessly Judd's work coexists with the sparse Texas landscape.

This much earth and sky can make you hungry. I venture back into town and order a falafel platter at the Food Shark truck. "You can wait in the bus," proprietor Adam Bork informs me, pointing toward a yellow school bus that's been converted into a dining room. When it's done, he screams "DERRIK!" on a megaphone. The meal has za'atar-spiced pita chips, a tangy Greek salad, a glop of hummus and a pair of falafel balls smothered with yogurt, tahini and harissa. It looks like it could be freshly served from any fancy L.A. food truck but somehow tastes much yummier parked in Marfa. ➤

CELEBRATE A year of Marfa's shindigs

Marfa Myths

March 9-12
Instead of a single stage, musicians perform in curated spaces around town.
marfamyths.com

Marfa Film Festival

July 12-16
With screenings across town, this fest highlights both new and established filmmakers.
marfafilmfestival.com

Marfa Lights

Sept. 1-3
The enigmatic glowing orbs spotted in the sky outside town are honored Labor Day weekend.
marfachamber.org

The sweet Sioux-style teepees at El Cosmico feature queen beds, toolbox minibars and an outlet for charging devices



At sundown, there's more art to see. I visit Robert Irwin's haunting new 10,000-square-foot installation that opened last year down the road from Judd's compound. The project, which took 17 years to complete, is a U-shaped building lit only by the sun. Inside, Irwin leads visitors on a voyage from dark to light by utilizing paint and screens of various shades. Because of its mammoth scale, it's a piece that couldn't exist in a

finished. Across the street, he's renovating an old brick building that will house a casual restaurant and a pool that will be open in time for spring break, a popular time for visitors.

Crowley and the other locals I speak with don't seem too concerned that the continued fascination with Marfa will usher in legions of developers and hipsters, intent on turning it into another overpopulated Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or Silver Lake, Los Angeles. The isolated town is partially surrounded by private ranches, so there's little fear of sprawl.

"The beauty of Marfa is there are these limitations you butt up against," says Susan Sutton, yet another Houston transplant and executive director of the arts organi-

zation Ballroom Marfa. "Embracing these limitations actually make the experiences we produce here special." Sutton first fell in love with the town while visiting friends during a New Year's Eve party. "I was dancing between this rancher and a major New York art collector. Marfa embodies those juxtapositions."

The following morning, I head out of town, passing the observation area where these mysterious orbs—some say they're just reflections, others have paranormal theories—appear in the night sky. I didn't have the opportunity to glimpse Marfa's famous lights during my stop-over, but that's OK. It gives me an excuse to come back. **AW**

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major city. I walk around it four times before drifting back to the Hotel Paisano.

The next morning, I meet up with Tim Crowley, an unassuming attorney from Houston who co-opened the Marfa Book Company bookstore in 1999. Last year, he expanded the store into the plush Hotel Saint George, complete with a restaurant. Crowley winces when I refer to the establishment as the town's first luxury hotel. "It is full service, which in Marfa means it's at least basic service," he says. "We're not offering foot massages and turn-down service. You have a TV *and* a telephone in the room. This is one of the only places in town where you have both." Crowley isn't

STAY

Where to lay your head in Marfa



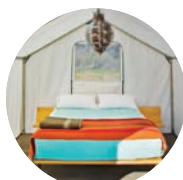
Hotel Paisano

From the moody lobby to the 41 rooms, this hotel drips with Old West ambiance. hotelpaisano.com



Hotel Saint George

Boasting fine views of Marfa, the sparkling four-story building features an airy lobby. marfasaintgeorge.com



El Cosmico

The funky campground offers tricked-out yurts, trailers and teepees with the comforts of a hotel room. elcosmico.com



Thunderbird Hotel

The pale-blue former roadside motel combines minimalist accommodations with hip touches. thunderbirdmarfa.com