



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big Bend National Park
Rio Grande Wild & Scenic River

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Big Bend National Park

Quotations about the Big Bend

Finally, I wish to offer my opinion, just as a private visitor, that although the old saying that “he who travels must be prepared to take away only as much as he brings with him” applies to all our great parks, it holds true especially of Big Bend. It is a desert-mountain country whose qualities offer an allurements, a satisfaction of soul, only if the visitor will put himself in the right mood, and will remain long enough to know it with some intimacy. He who drives in and drives out without letting the motor cool, may see, to be sure, some most interesting natural objects, but he will not know, and can never love, Big Bend.

-Freeman Tilden, 1945

But above all, Big Bend Park is the untamed, aloof, but never-ugly desert, with a whimsical river for deckle edge. Some folks say they do not like the desert. I wonder if they remained long enough to know? To me, the hours just before and after sunset, in this desert, in the shadow of the Sierra del Carmens, when they redden to a deep crimson, and then fade to violet, with a finality of black velvet—and the moon comes rising behind the Chisos, and cleanliness and vastness enwrap everything—to me this is one of life’s moving experiences. Nobody really knows the desert who has not felt, seen, and surrendered himself to it, at dusk.

-Freeman Tilden, 1944

Big Bend is a land of strong beauty — often savage and always imposing. It is magnificent. The bold mountains rear abruptly against the endless blue sky with tracteries of white clouds. The “Long Look” never fades. The enticing view to the horizon ends in a haze of gray or blue or brown as the sky eats up the land. The land disappears but the sky is still there, the forever edge of the world that is always inviting.

-Lon Garrison, 1983

(served as the second superintendent, 1952-1955)

You need to see this place to experience the awesome moment when your heart stands still and your whole body seems to swell—almost to soar. The scene was so unexpected, so spectacular, we gasped as we saw for the first time this view of incredible beauty. As we topped the divide we could look down into a small bowl of a valley where typical government barracks were clustered like so many toy houses. The valley was surrounded by sparsely vegetated mountains spiked with pink rock formations that rose on all sides in rugged spires and cliffs.

At the far end of the valley, beyond the winding road, our eyes settled on a cleft in the ring of mountains—the Window—and through this window we could clearly see another world. It was a white desert world like the one we’d just passed through, and beyond the whiteness were the purple and blue mountain ranges of Mexico.

-Etta Koch, 1945

We came to the Big Bend country toward sunset, that part of Texas where the Rio Grande makes a U-shaped bend in its course. In a lifetime spent in traveling, here I came upon the greatest wonder. The mantle of God touches you; it is what Beethoven reached for in music; it is panorama without beginning or end.

No fire can burn so bright, no projection can duplicate the colors that dance over the desert or the bare rock formations that form the backdrop. No words can tell you, and no painter hold it. It is only to be visited and looked at with awe. It will make you breathe deeply whenever you think of it, for you have inhaled eternity.

There is no tree, no house to measure things by. You are in scale with the cactus plant, the stone in the distance — the all-important and the nothing.

-Ludwig Bemelmans,
"Texas Legend," McCall's, August 1956

Half the pleasure of a visit to Big Bend National Park, as in certain other affairs, lies in the advance upon the object of our desire. Coming toward the park from the village of Lajitas deep in west Texas, we see this rampart of volcanic cliffs rising a mile above the surrounding desert. Like a castled fortification of Wagnerian gods, the Chisos Mountains stand alone in the morning haze, isolated and formidable, unconnected with other mountains, remote from any major range. Crowned with a forest of juniper, piñon pine, oak, madrone, and other trees the Chisos rise like an island of greenery and life in the midst of the barren, sun-blasted, apparently lifeless, stone-bleak ocean of the Chihuahuan Desert. An emerald isle in a red sea.

-Edward Abbey, "Big Bend"

We wake at dawn to discover the desert hills shrouded in rolling clouds of vapor, seeming remote and mystical as the Mountains of the Moon. A rare and lovely sight and we are sorry to leave. We console ourselves, as we always do, with the thought that we'll be back, someday soon. We will return, someday, and when we do the gritty splendor and the complicated grandeur of Big Bend will still be here. Waiting for us. Isn't that what we always think as we hurry on, rushing toward the inane infinity of our unnameable desires? Isn't that what we always say?

-Edward Abbey, "Big Bend"

I'd rather be broke down and lost in the wilds of Big Bend, any day, than wake up some morning in a penthouse suite high above the megalomania of Dallas or Houston.

-Edward Abbey, "Big Bend"

In the windy air above a Harris hawk patrols its beat, looking for lunch. The presence of the hawk implies the presence on the ground below, among the deserts scrubby vegetation of a fair population of mice, rabbits, ground squirrels, lizards, and other reptiles. Beyond the hawk, and common everywhere in the Big Bend area, soars the red-headed turkey vulture—sometimes in swarms. Where life is, there is death, reasons the vulture and where there's death there's hope. When life is cheap death is rich.

-Edward Abbey, "Big Bend"

The country isn't bad. It's just worse. Worse the moment you set foot from the train, and then, after that, just worsen and worsen.

-Journalist covering the military expedition in the Big Bend, 1916.

WHEREAS, The largest canyons on the North American continent (with the exception of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado) are situated in Brewster County, Texas, upon the Rio Grande, and said canyons and the lands and territory contiguous thereto constitute one of the scenic wonders of North America; and

WHEREAS, The State of Texas, as Trustee for the Public School Fund, is the owner of a considerable body of land adjoining and abutting upon said canyons, which land is rough, rugged and worthless for any purpose except for its scenic beauty and park purposes; and

WHEREAS, The creation of a State Park adjoining said canyons would result in opening up to the public of Texas and the United States one of the finest parks...

-Preamble to Texas House Bill Number 771, which established the Texas Canyons State Park (later renamed Big Bend State park) in May, 1933.

The physiographic order of the Big Bend is somewhat like the order of a great city built of stone and brick—wrecked by an earthquake. Perhaps order once prevailed there, but some mighty force wrecked the place, shook it down, turned it over, blew it up, and set it afire. Evidences that all this happened exist on every hand, making the land the finest example of earth-wreckage in Texas.

-Walter Prescott Webb, 1937