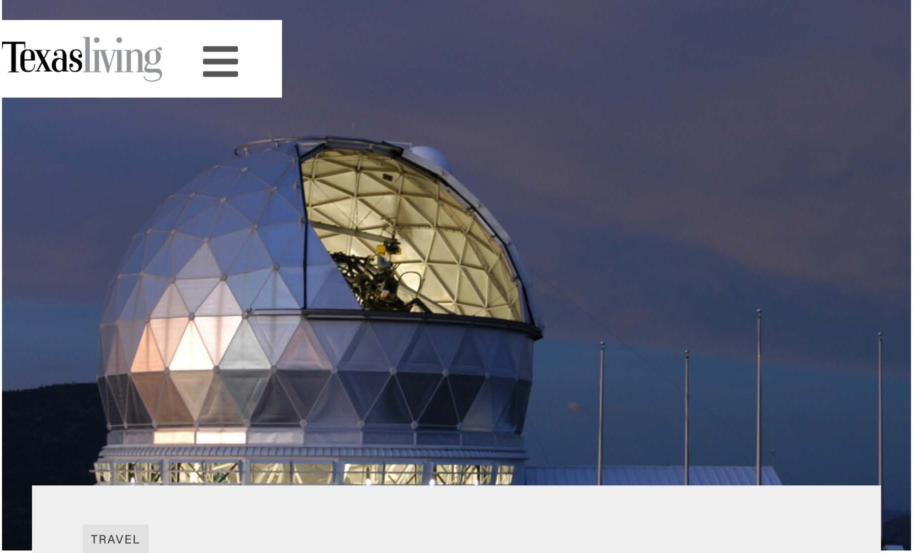

TRAVEL

THE COSMOS AND THE COSMIC

Written by: Alisha McDarris

In West and Southwest Texas, the landscape jumps and starts with limestone hills and mesas peppered with scrub. It is soft desert greens, ashen browns, and brick red rocks and cliffs. It is like no other place on earth.

Exploring Texas's otherworldly places offers celestial adventures like nowhere else. From identifying sunspots at McDonald Observatory to anxiously anticipating the Marfa Lights to stargazing at Big Bend National Park, the state has so much to offer when it comes to the cosmos and the cosmic, and they can all be experienced on one heavenly road trip.

McDonald Observatory

Learn About the Cosmos

Start your road trip with a stop a McDonald Observatory. From Austin, San Antonio, and Houston take I-10 West (east from El Paso). From Dallas, I-20. From there, a few turns south on Route 17 and west on 118 take you to your destination. The drive to McDonald Observatory is a winding road that curves up the tallest hill in sight, on top of which is perched the domed, white observatory.

Depending on the day of the week, McDonald Observatory offers tours, tales, insights, and viewings of the sky. From Twilight and Star Party programs three times a week to special viewing nights that allow visitors to peer through the observatory's research telescopes a few times a month to solar viewings during the day, paying a visit to this world-class observatory in an essential Texas experience.

You will get a demo of the multimillion-dollar telescope in the iconic white dome on a hill, learn aboout student and professional efforts to study the stars, learn about dark sky initiatives that help us all enjoy the night sky, and listen as the story of the life of a star is told from beginning to end.

On your way out of town, stop for a sweet treat at Herbert's Caboose Ice Cream Shop, a quirky pitstop in Fort Davis.

Marfa

Experience the Cosmic

From there, it is lesss than 40 miles south on 17 to Marfa, where the cosmic is celebrated in every form imaginable. From within bookstores like Marfa Book Company that offers titles from the everyday to the more-than-slightly-strange, to other-worldly art at gallery shoops like Wrong Store to unique accomodomations like the aptly named El Cosmico that offers lodgings from Safari tents to an ultra-modern Cosmic Kasita, there is something for everyone. You can also pick up all manner of high desert goods from El Cosmico Provision Company. Stay for a night or two to give yourself ample time to peruse shops like Marfa Brands for soap or Frama for a proper macchiator and a scoop of ice cream.

Fill your belly at swanky Cochineal, which updates its menu frequently to ensure ingredients are fresh and local. Or pick up one of the eclectic menu offerings (or go with the tried and true Marfalafel) from the retro food truck Food Shark.

But maybe the most iconic of cosmic experiences in the city involves the famed Marfa lights. They say you can spot the mysterious orbs that dance and shimmer above the desert landscape over

Mitchell Flat east of town. The lights have been attributed to UFOs, even ghosts. While skeptics insist they are likely caused by atmospheric reflections of headlights, campfires, even mere desert mirages, and even though most locals will admit to never having seen them, it does not prevent travelers form venturing toward the outskirts of the city with a chair, a thermos, and a pocketful of snacks in hopes of making it to the wee hours when the colorful flashes might bless them with their presence.

Big Bend National Park

Wonder at the Cosmos

When it comes time to view the cosmos in all its glory, there may be no better place than Big Bend National Park. Rated by the International Dark-Sky Association as a gold park, its distance from civilization means the night sky is unpolluted by light spilling over from metropolises like Austin, Houston, or even Marfa. In fact, it is the darkest park in the lower 48, meaning there are no other national parks that offer a better late-night light show.

That is because it is so far removed from city lights, and the park itself abides by dark sky-friendly lighting ordinances that make the stars shine, the Milky Way shimmer, and visitors stare up at its clarity in awe.

For the best viewing experience, get comfortable. Bring blankets or lounge chairs to keep from straining, a thermos of hot chocolate or a few bottles of Topo Chico, and give your eyes 20 minutes to adjust to the dark after turning off flashlights or headlamps. If you must turn on a light, use a red light, which will allow you to see but will preserve your night visino so you can keep marveling at the cosmos in all its glory.

Get there by heading east on US-90 from Marfa, then taking US-385 south all the way into the park, about three hours. When you venture back out, stop for a meal at the Starlight Theatre, a restaurant in a former cinema in Terlingua, or beer and barbeque at Brick Vault Brewery and Barbeque in Marathon.

Take Time to Look Up

Venture into West and Southwest Texas for the best close-ups of the cosmos and the cosmic and take some time to look up. The views are not a mere day trip from most Texas cities, but you will likely find that it is well worth the journey to explore and experience the ethereal wonders Texas has to offer. After all, McDonald, Marfa, and Big Bend are nothing if not a match made in the heavens.

MCDONALD OBSERVATOR
AND VISITORS CENTER

Photo Courtesy of: Damond Benningfield

Photo Courtesy of: Ethan Tweedie Photography

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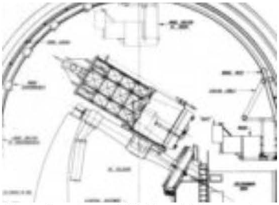

Photo Courtesy of: McDonald Observatory

Photo Courtesy of: Tom Montemayor

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TEXAS
MARFA LIGHTS

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