

# THREE TEXAS TOWNS

MARFA ★ ALPINE ★ FORT DAVIS

## Marfa, Texas, 2009

A noon sun beats down on Marfa, reducing precious shade to small bands along the bottoms of occasional walls. I am standing in the sun squinting at a building very similar to the commercial buildings in any number of rural Texas towns, except for the fact that this 80-year-old two-story former bank has been sand-blasted, patched-up, re-roofed, and repainted to look like new. And so has the one next to it, and the one next to that. The sun-bleached, weather-worn look of the typical rural Texas building has been replaced with a sort of movie-set false reality (although on a movie set, the buildings

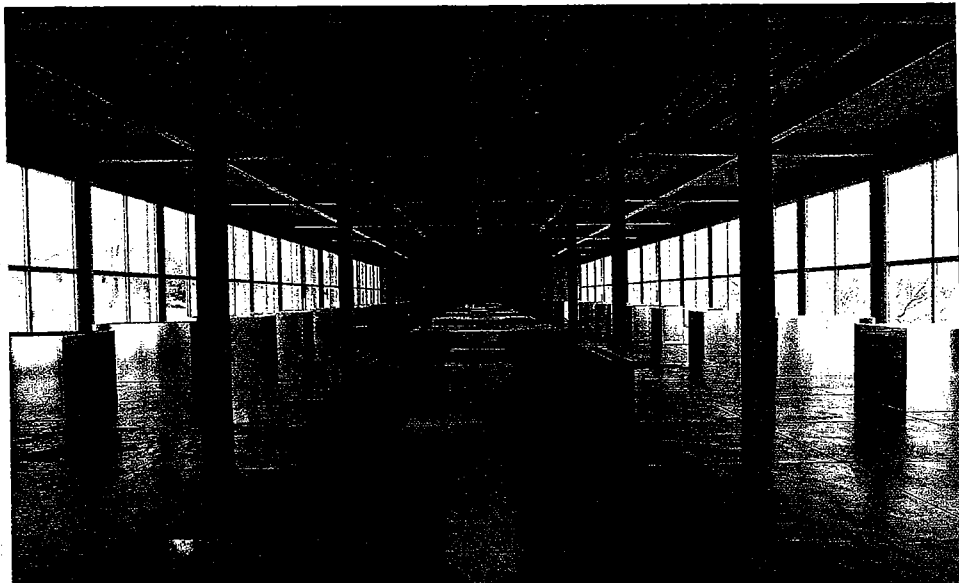


TEXAS TOURISM/KENNY BRAUN



would have been further repainted to look *not*-repainted). I am tempted to ask myself, “What is going on here?” but from researching Marfa prior to this trip, I already know. Call it the Juddville Effect.

Opposite page: 101 Spring Street in New York (top) was the Judd studio in the years preceding his move to Marfa, Texas. Donald Judd (far left) in about 1990. The Texas branch of the Judd Foundation is located on south Highland Street (left) in Marfa. A pick-up is reflected in the window of a southwest Texas shop (above).



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**Buildings of the former D.A. Russell Army Base at Marfa now house the Chinati Foundation, an organization dedicated to preserving the legacy of Donald Judd while providing educational and studio space for visiting artists. Mr. Judd's work is displayed in a building (top) which had glass walls installed under Judd's supervision.**

When Donald Judd arrived in Marfa in the 1970s, he established his art operation on a property he had purchased just south of town—the old, decommissioned Fort D.A. Russell army base. Although he eventually acquired other properties around town, he really had no intention of gentrifying the remote burg. He appreciated the rustic quality of this area and further isolated himself away from town on a ranch that didn't even have electricity. But, on the other hand, it could be safely said that he didn't want his art to exist in a vacuum, either. So his art complex was expanded and developed to accommodate other artists and to include display spaces—both indoors and outdoors—for a broad collection of permanent and temporary works. Visitors, of course, were an inevitable consequence of this operation. Some stayed on, among them artists, art dealers, and the lodging and dining entrepreneurs catering to the new activity, and building on the fine art legacy sown by Mr. Judd. Voilá, accidental gentrification.

My personal connection to Marfa involves Edna Ferber, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author who wrote *So Big* (1924) and *Giant* (1952). Ms. Ferber included my ancestral relatives in *So Big*, and supposedly stayed with them briefly while researching the Dutch community on the south side of Chicago. In a distantly related happenstance, the movie version of Ferber's later novel *Giant*, with James Dean famously in the cast, was filmed in Marfa, Texas, or at least much of the outdoor footage was shot there. The pen of Edna Ferber scribes the finest of lines connecting

me to Marfa, Texas. And, like a lot of folks, I have a fascination with the wide-open, often parched, landscapes of the American west—for which Marfa amply qualifies as an anchor point even as it emerges as a sort of cultural oasis.

Standing in the center of town, though, it is not all Santa Fe southwest glitz. The buildings are low, with flat pitched ranch-style roof lines. Most of them are not renovated. The vegetation in this high desert enclave is hardy and somewhat sparse, although there is enough water in town to irrigate a fair number of streetside trees. The town of Marfa still hews to its roots as an outpost that has seen episodes of Western history unfold on its doorstep. In 1913, Pancho Villa and his associates, while fighting for Mexican independence, drove a band of Mexican troops across the border from Mexico. The troops were detained briefly in Presidio, south of Marfa, until the U.S. authorities could figure out what to do with them. (They were sent back to Mexico.)

Camp Marfa, as the town was originally called, was a water stop on the Southern Pacific Railroad line that passed through the area. The wife of the rail superintendent was given the task of naming towns along the line, and the fact that Marfa and several other towns along the line have Russian names has led historians to believe that the names were taken either from Feodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* or from Jules Verne's *Michael Strogoff*. The rail line in later years delivered thousands of military men to Marfa for training in flying and artillery, and German prisoners of war were detained at Marfa during World War II.

The same Southern Pacific rail line carried Bick Benedict, and the future Mrs. Benedict, back to his ranch, "Reata," in the film *Giant*. Timbers from the large Victorian house that was constructed for the film are scattered about outside town and the windmill that was on Jett Rink's property still turns. The site of Reata is on private land, but what does remain of the structure near Highway 90 west of town is slowly disappearing into the pockets of "Deaners" who make the pilgrimage to the site of James Dean's last film.

The architectural centerpiece of Marfa is the Presidio County Courthouse, c. 1885. It presides over Marfa's main street, North Highland Avenue. A block down from the courthouse the Hotel Paisano continues as

the town's social nerve center as it has for many decades. It has been "the place to stay" since 1931, having hosted three U.S. Presidents, plus ranchers from all of southwest Texas trading cattle and land under its roof. It was home base for the *Giant* cast as well—Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, James Dean, and Dennis Hopper .

West Texas is ranch country, and the cattle trade won't disappear soon from the area, but tourism is becoming the new commerce of Marfa. On the plus side: good restaurants, comfortable lodging, live entertainment, shops, and museums and art galleries to peruse. On the negative side: other tourists. The town of about 2,000 has three art museums and (currently) nine art galleries for the viewing and purchasing pleasure of its guests. But be warned—Marfa does not traffic in souvenir-type art. The collections are of serious art created by serious artists. The Donald Judd sculptures installed on the grounds of Chinati Foundation are an example. (They are not for sale.)

Along with top tier art, top tier entertainment makes it way to Marfa. Rock and pop concerts in such an out-of-the-way place may seem a bit unusual, but they are part of the Marfa allure. Any performers bringing a show to town face the fact that they may be competing with the Marfa Lights. For over 100 years the mercurial phenomenon has mystified viewers. The glowing lights that move about the hills outside of town are as yet unexplained. In some way, the mystery is enhanced by the fact that one of the nation's top astronomical facilities is located not far from Marfa.

**McDonald Observatory, Fort Davis, Texas**

"...for the University of Texas McDonald Observatory, I'm Sandy Wood." How many times we have heard that familiar sign-off! "Stardate," the popular two-minute astronomy capsule that airs daily on hundreds of radio stations, has been delivering tasty morsels of celestial information for 31 years—and back in 2003 when the University of Texas McDonald Observatory celebrated 25 years of broadcasting, "Stardate" noted that the radio waves of the initial October, 1978, broadcast were just reaching the white dwarf star Vega, some 25 light years from Earth. It may have been the first that anyone in Vega's solar system (if there is one) had heard of the McDonald Observatory, but nonetheless, the

noted observatory had made itself known to a rather vast audience. (Texans think big!)

The McDonald Observatory at Fort Davis, Texas, is home to four large telescopes including the 9.2 meter (362") Hobby-Eberly Telescope—ranked as the fourth largest in the world. For the benefit of the public, the observatory complex includes the likewise world-class Frank N. Bash Visitors Center. Supported by a café and gift shop, the essence of the center is an assortment of interactive exhibits in the visitor center, and several programs conducted at the observatory for visi-

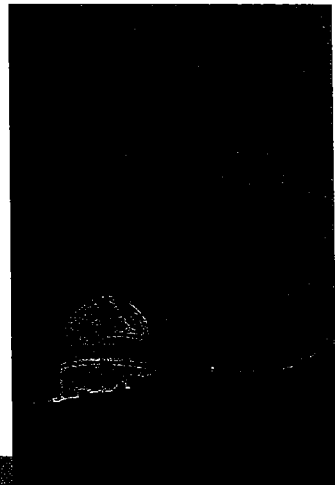


TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

tors. The Solar Viewing program (as in "checking out our own sun") is conducted every day from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and the self-guided tour, daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., lets you get a close-up look at the sleeping (remember, telescopes are generally nocturnal) 362" Hobby-Eberly Telescope. A nighttime program called Star Party is conducted on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday evenings at the Visitors Center Public Observatory with starting times varying by season—check the website for the start time during your visit. This is your chance to view the universe through some of the facility's scopes. An optional twilight program (highly recommended) precedes the Star Party events, so get there 90 minutes early if you can.

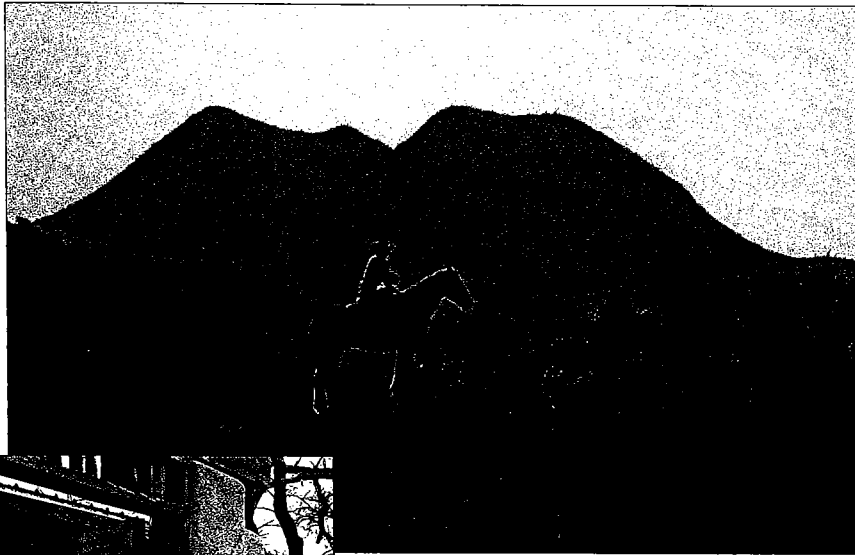


TEXAS TOURISM/KENNY BRAUN



TEXAS TOURISM/J. GRIFFIS SMITH

**"Stardate," the popular radio spots, are produced at McDonald Observatory (top) at Fort Davis. Southwest Texas hosted the Huff Wagon Train (above middle), a 2005 project that gave students a pioneer experience. The lobby of the Hotel Paisano (above) has greeted guests since 1930.**



TEXAS TOURISM



TEXAS TOURISM/KENNY BRAUN

**A cowboy (top) is silhouetted by the setting sun near Alpine.**

**Western music adds to the wagon wheel ambiance (above) of the Maverick Hotel in Alpine.**

**At the Edelweiss Restaurant in Alpine's Holland Hotel, guests can enjoy traditional German or American food.**

### Fort Davis and Alpine

The road from Marfa to the observatory takes you right through Fort Davis. The quiet town of about 1200 is named for the army fort that was built there in 1854, serving as an important element (along with Fort Russell in Marfa) of the western frontier until 1891.

The remains are now a National Historic Site with a few reconstructed and refurbished buildings along with the original foundations of the fort buildings on view. The historic Limpia Hotel on the original town square, along with several B&Bs, provides memorable accommodations with a good central location. Continuing north from the town past the fort, Highway 118 travels another 19 miles to the McDonald Observatory, passing the entrance to the Davis Mountains State Park on the way. At an altitude of between 5000 and 6000 feet, the 2700-acre park provides a range of terrains that are challenging to hike, yet surprisingly mild (climate-wise) for Texas. The grand Indian Lodge (hotel) was built at the park in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, and provides guests with dining and swimming facilities, plus, of course, the recreational opportunities of the park, which include several miles of maintained hiking trails.

Completing a nearly perfect equilateral triangle with the towns of Marfa and Fort Davis is Alpine, named for its location on the high-desert Chihuahuan Plateau. It sits at an altitude of 4,475 feet, but despite Alpine's name, both Marfa and Fort

Davis are higher in elevation. Of the three, it does, however, have the greatest population, at just over 6000. The Museum of the Big Bend, on the Sul Ross State University campus, qualifies Alpine as a gateway to the national park on Texas's southern border. The museum's well-crafted exhibits display artifacts from the four cultures that have occupied the Big Bend region for over 11,000 years. At the university itself you can major in ranching, although the school calls it "range science," and while you're at it, you can join the school's rodeo team. The National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association was founded in Alpine, and the nationals are held on the campus each fall. Every spring the big event is the week-long Cowboy Poetry Gathering. The Sul Ross Lobos play home baseball games in a downsized version of (the former) Yankee Stadium that was built for a onetime Alpine minor league team. A bit of the Bronx in Texas cattle country? Now there's a stretch!

Amtrak service and summer temperatures that generally stay below 90 degrees in the daytime make Alpine a popular getaway destination for Southwesterners. Rock hound hobbyists are drawn to Alpine by the geological offerings, including the 4000-acre Woodward Agate Ranch where a wide variety of semi-precious stones can be found (and carted off for \$2 per pound). Historic hotels, a good selection of shops, excellent restaurants, and many activities make Alpine and its neighbors Marfa and Fort Davis much more than dusty ranch towns. If you can get your arms around art, astronomy, rodeo, and geology all in one week, you can bust out a great West Texas Panhandle vacation!



TEXAS TOURISM/KENNY BRAUN

## INFORMATION FOR TRAVELERS

**Marfa Chamber of Commerce**, 207 North Highland Avenue, Marfa, TX. Phone: 432/729-4942, [www.marfac.com](http://www.marfac.com). The Marfa chamber is a good source for most all of Marfa's activities and attractions, including information on Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation. Sections on the website dedicated to lodging, dining, art, and an events calendar make this a valuable travel resource.

**Chinati Foundation**, 1 Cavalry Row, Marfa, TX. Phone 432/729-4362, [www.chinati.org](http://www.chinati.org). The Chinati Foundation oversees Donald Judd's main facility in Marfa, the former Fort D. A. Russell Army Base. Educational programs are conducted here and artworks are on display in both indoor and outdoor areas. Visitors must sign up for a tour, conducted Wednesdays-Sundays. Tours are long, beginning at 10 a.m., breaking for lunch at noon, and resuming at 2 p.m. Reservations are recommended, call at least three days in advance. Adults \$10, students and seniors \$5. The Chinati Foundation is closed to the public July 4th, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, Christmas, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

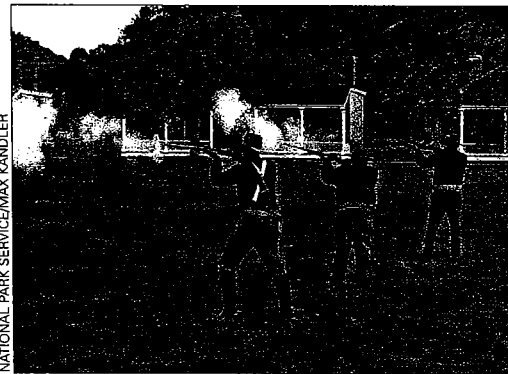
**Judd Foundation**, 104 South Highland Avenue, Marfa, TX. Phone: 432/729-4406; [www.juddfoundation.org](http://www.juddfoundation.org). Judd Foundation oversees artist Donald Judd's New York studio and residence at 101 Spring Street, New York, which is currently closed for renovation; and several of Mr. Judd's spaces in and around Marfa, Texas. The Marfa residence and studio of the artist (400 El Paso Street) is open for tours Wednesday-Sunday at 4:30 p.m. Adults \$20, students \$10. Tours of additional spaces in Marfa are conducted at 2 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays only from 104 South Highland Avenue. Adults \$30, students \$10. No late arrivals, no photography. Some of the spaces may be closed for restoration.

**McDonald Observatory**, Fort Davis, Texas. Phone: 432/426-3640; [www.mcdonaldobservatory.org](http://www.mcdonaldobservatory.org). The observatory offers a number of programs and tours. The Visitors Center and Public Observatory is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Adults \$8, children 6-12 \$7, families 5+ \$30. Includes the Solar Viewing program at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily. Visitors may tour the Hobby-Eberly Telescope (at a nearby location) from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, self-guided, free. Evening Star Parties are conducted on Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, check online for start times. Adults \$10, children 6-12 \$8, family 5+ \$40. Check website for combination passes and additional programs, such as the Twilight Program and the Telescope view/Dinner events.

**Fort Davis Chamber of Commerce**, 4 Memorial Square, Fort Davis, TX. Phone: 800/524-3015 or 432/426-3015; [www.fortdavis.com](http://www.fortdavis.com). Complete information on lodging, dining, and sightseeing is provided, including a listing of bed & breakfast inns and guest houses.

**Davis Mountains State Park**, P.O. Box 1707, Fort Davis, TX 79734. Phone: 432/426-3337. Indian Lodge phone: 432/426-3254; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/findadest/parks/davis\\_mountains](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/findadest/parks/davis_mountains). Park activities include hiking, camping, mountain biking, equestrian use, auto sightseeing/wildlife viewing. Entrance fee: \$5 per day, per person. Additional fees for camping. Indian Lodge provides additional activities such as dining and swimming. Stargazing from Skyline Drive is allowed after closing with special permission obtained in advance at park headquarters.

**Fort Davis National Historic Site**, P.O. Box 1379, Fort Davis, TX 79734. Phone: 432/426-3224; [www.nps.gov/foda](http://www.nps.gov/foda). Park is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Entrance \$3 per person.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE/MAX KANDLER

In their roles as cavalymen, frontier reenactors fire their weapons on the parade ground at the Fort Davis National Historic Site. The fort, now partially restored, was active from 1854 to 1891.

**Alpine Chamber of Commerce**, 106 North Third Street, Alpine, TX 79830. Phone: 800/561-3712 or 432/837-2326; <http://visitorcenter.alpine-texas.com>. As the activity hub of the central Big Bend area, there is lots going on in Alpine. Information on lodging, history, shopping, events, and activities (but not on restaurants) is maintained by the Chamber.

**Sul Ross State University**, P.O. Box C-114, Alpine, TX 79832. Phone: 432/837-8011; [www.sulross.edu](http://www.sulross.edu). A number of Alpine's activities are centered at Sul Ross, including the Intercollegiate Rodeo Nationals, the Cowboy Poetry Gathering, theater, sports, and the Museum of the Big Bend. The school maintains an online calendar of public rodeo, sports, art, and theatrical events.