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## **Stop 13. Big Bend**

Arrival datetime: Friday, April 19, 6:00PM  
Sites visited: Big Bend National Park  
Accommodations: Chios Mountain Lodge  
States traveled: Texas

100 miles out of San Antonio, Michael pulled off the highway. There was nothing around. Jennifer looked at him. He pointed to the fuel indicator. The gauge said there was none left and there was a flashing “E” on the dash. Jennifer looked up the flashing E in the owner’s manual. It meant that we had 1.2 gallons of gas left. She turned off the air conditioner, and unplugged the cooler and the phone. The next exit was 5 miles. Still no signs of life. The one after that was 13 miles. Still nothing. But a few miles later, a billboard. There would be a truck stop in 3 miles. We held our breath. Michael was coasting on the downhills. We ignored the three stop signs between the exit to the gas station as we coasted to the pump. We took 18.3 gallons of gas. The tank capacity was 18.5.

The landscape by this time was hilly. Where the road was cut out between the hills, we saw layers of limestone. But for the most part, the hills were covered with rich green low lying vegetation. A small percentage of mesas among the hills steadily increased. The green became more sparse. We stopped at Fort Lancaster State Park. It was an up close look at the desert landscape. The ruins of the old fort were interesting, as well as the story of how it was one of a string of military establishments that protected the Pecos River passage and the mail route

from San Antonio to San Diego. However, we were more captivated by a little nature trail that gave names to the various plants we had seen from the highway: purple cactus, horse crippler, and prickly pear. The cactus names were easier to remember, but there were many green bushes and flowers whose names we forgot as soon as we walked away from the garden.

There was a Visitor Center, but the Ranger had been gone when we arrived. He apologized profusely upon his return and waived the two-dollar cover charge. He also warned us that, other than the town of Sheffield 10 miles down, there would be no lunch for at least 50 more miles. So we bought and microwaved a burrito in a general store and ate it in the car.

The Ranger had said there seemed to be a lot of people headed to Big Bend this time of year, but we did not notice many. For the longest part of the drive, the only people we saw were the border patrol. Then we started to see the mountains. There had been patterns of blue in the distance behind the hills on the highway, but these mountains were pink, brown, and orange. They radiated color in the late afternoon sun. We stopped only briefly in the three Visitors Centers on the way to the lodge, but stopped twice as

many times to take pictures of mountains in the distance. The mountains ranged from pyramids and spiky cactus-looking shapes to long straight mesas. All were displaying a variety of colors in the now setting sun. Many had patterns of green moss and other vegetation in addition to the layers of pink, brown, and orange that we had seen on the ranges before entering the park.

It was a bit cloudy. At one of the Visitors Centers, a Ranger remarked that we were likely to see rain. When Michael reacted negatively the Ranger chided him, "Anybody can come to the desert when it's not raining."

We checked in on time for dinner and got a table by the window at Chisos Mountain Lodge. The rain started as passing sprinkles but quickly turned into slanting sheets that dislodged small trees and brought out deep hues of green and rose on the Casa Grande mountainside just outside our window. Lightening streaked in both vertical and horizontal patterns, adding bright yellow to the colorful display.

People came out of nowhere to find shelter on the Lodge's porch. A photographer set up a tripod for a time-release photo, shielding his camera with a handkerchief. The lightening was so steady that he was sure to capture some within a short interval. As quickly and as gradually as it started, it stopped. The intervals between the thunder grew longer, the rain lessened to a soft patter. The sun came out, turning the event into a summer sun shower. Then the rain stopped altogether. As we walked to our lodge room, we saw a fabulous sunset

over a V-shaped space between two mountains they called "The Window."



*A Big Bend sunset.*

We had arranged for a guided canoe trip on the Rio Grande. We had wanted a raft trip, but the booking agent had told us that the water was too low they were not doing raft trips at all, just canoe trips. We met our guide at Saint Elena Canyon parking lot at 9:15AM. The Rio Grande was 400 yards away. We had to carry a canoe that weighed over a hundred pounds to the River. Then we had to walk it a few hundred more feet until the river got deep enough for it to float. Yet it was well worth the effort to venture onto the water for the awesome beauty of the canyon. The first sight of it had our whole tour group gasping. Jennifer sighed, "We will never be able to capture this with a camera." Another member of the group responded, "Yeah, that's why we're here." This immediately became a recurring theme anytime we were not sure we could get a good photo of something we had seen, "That's why we're here." If it could be captured on photos, we could have stayed home with a coffee table book.

Our guide admitted that the water was so low, they had not done raft trips for



*The drought depleted Rio Grande in Saint Elena Canyon.*

years. He told us how he was a white water guide recruited out of a gig on the Colorado River to come down here, only to find out that he had to take people out on canoes. So we were supposed to feel sorry for him as we walked our canoe through ankle-deep rapids at least eight times on the outbound journey.

The Canyon was about 1500 feet of sheer rock face on either side of the river, which was never more than twenty feet across. We journeyed into it far enough to hike along one of the streams that fed into the river. It had created a gorge of its own, with high cliff walls and rock formations. At one point, a rock had lodged itself between the sides of the cliffs. We scaled a steep wall to cross the stream using the rock as a bridge. At another point, the smooth rock walls on either side forced us to walk in the stream, which had traced a very narrow snake-like passage under a similarly lodged rock. The furthest we could comfortably scramble was over a 25-foot diameter oval floor of stark white limestone, embedded with a series of oval spring fed pools. Crevasses between the pools allowed the flow of water to join the stream.

We ate lunch near our canoes on the riverbank. The sun moved steadily through the canyon, showing us different colors in the cliffs above and three times making us move the lifejackets were sitting on in order to stay in the shade.

The way back was just as beautiful and more eventful. Though the water was higher and should have lessened the need for getting out and walking the canoe, our guide strayed about a quarter mile ahead of us to meet the demand for speed

from our twenty-something beer-guzzling companions. The first rapid that we had to walk over put us well behind the group, with the consequence that we could not pick out the path navigated by our guide and so hit many more shallow spots than were necessary.

We took our time and took pictures. When we hit our starting point, the rest of the crew was on the beach. Carrying the canoes back up the 400 yards to the parking lot was too strenuous even for a strong woman like Jennifer. She emerged into the parking lot with very sore forearms. We jumped in the car and left without helping the guide load the canoes onto his truck or giving him a tip. We figured the twenty-somethings could handle both.

The car must have been 110° inside. We could not stay in it for long. We pulled over at the next opportunity, which turned out to be a Rio Grande access road. We had our bathing suits under our clothes for the canoe experience. We figured we would plunge in for a swim to cool off, but the water was only up to our ankles. We waded a bit anyway while the air conditioner cooled down the car.

Though the river trip was supposed to be an all day event, it was only 3:00PM or so, so we drove to the Rio Grande Village side of the park. The car said the temperature was 100° at 4:00PM, when we stopped to take a ¾ mile hike to a Hot Spring. The hike followed abandoned touristy looking white adobe buildings to the Rio Grande. It was much wider here, but from the rocky ripples, it was obviously a few feet deep at the most here as well. A 15-foot square abandoned foundation of a bathhouse

next to the river was full of water and we passed by it, not realizing it was the destination of our hike.

We admired the pink slatey rock wall to our left. It also formed a smooth walking surface as if it has been placed there as tile. We admired a variety of flowering cactuses and shrubs. We tried to remember the names of the desert plants from our Fort Lancaster nature walk, but there were many more varieties and we could not even remember the names of those that were the same.

After seeing a sign that the Hot Spring was in the direction from which we had come, we backtracked. A man was sitting on the bathhouse foundation with his feet in the water. We stripped to our bathing suits and plunged. A plunge was more difficult than it sounds because the water was less than two feet deep and the bottom was mossy, so silt stirred up if you disturbed it. Jennifer gently planted her feet firmly on the moss and squatted as far down as possible. Her shoulders still loomed above the water. So she splashed her face and shoulders with her hands. Michael planted his hands on the edge of the foundation and floated his body straight out into the water. The water was truly hot. The 103° air actually felt a bit cool when we first exited the bathhouse.

We drove on to the Rio Grande overlook and found it was really a view of the Mexican Mountain range we had been admiring for most of the drive. Its chief characteristic was El Pico, a rectangular rise with a square base that rested on the top of otherwise long horizontal layers of alternating pink, brown, and sand colors. A stop at the Visitors Center gave us another educational tour of desert plant

life, but we did not pick up the brochure and again forgot the names of the plants by the time we went hiking the next morning.

Our morning hike destination was Emory Peak. The hike description was a 3.5-mile trek on the strenuous Pinnacles Trail, then a mile extension to Emory Peak itself. We left just before 9:00AM to make sure we finished the uphill part of the hike in the relatively cool morning temperatures. The trail led unrelentingly straight up. Stairs were a frequent relief from the loose rock, though ever the stairs were rock-strewn. We often stopped to take pictures of ever more expansive views and also the plants at our feet. Yucca and juniper we could name. But in addition, there were two-inch high green clusters of cactus covered in red flowers, five-foot high spines with feathery red flowers on the ends, short, wide trees covered with thin green leaves from the root to the ends of the branches, round cactus made up of wide green leaves with scalloped patterns of spines on the end, and even wider varieties with thinner spiky leaves.

As we ascended, more and more rugged and colorful mountains appeared in the same "Window" through which we had seen the sunset. Also, more mountain ranges became visible. Twenty-five yards from the very top, we faced a shear cliff with no trail guide or sign to tell us how to ascend. Following the advice of a group that had just come down, we hesitatingly grappled with some crevices in the wall. One-inch finger holds and two-inch footholds would bring us up three feet to the next eight-inch ledge. We leaned into the mountain and breathed with determination at every successful hurdle.



*The "Window" from the Pinnacles Trail.*

But the last five feet proved too much. We were looking down twenty feet to our starting point, which from that view seemed a very narrow ledge as well. Michael was a few feet above Jennifer and was looking over an even narrower precipice on the other side. We crawled our way to a one-foot ledge where we sat side by side and very carefully unpacked our lunch. We found the courage to eat and take some pictures of 270° views, knowing that the 360° views five feet up were probably similar enough for it not to be worth the potential price. We saw isolated mountain peaks of differing shapes and sizes, all surrounded by vast flat valleys. The colors ranged from light pink to deep blue, and all blended

together in the cloudy haze. But the same cloudy haze had protected us from brutal desert sun on the hike, so we were quite happy with the quality of our photos anyway.

The hike down was easy but the sun came out so it was a bit grueling. From signs with contradictory mileage estimates, and from the amount of time we spent hiking, we determined that our seven mile estimate was off by at least three miles. We came back tired and sore enough to nap before dinner.

Despite the dependable gorgeous desert mountain views from the panoramic windows, and the fact that staying there



*Looking down from the top.*

allowed us to have fairly short drives and see the whole park in three days, we were happy for this to be our last meal at Chios Mountain Lodge. The food was simple and fine if you ordered safely. But Michael ordered a chicken-fried steak with gravy. It turned out to be hamburger meat fried like chicken. Nevertheless, we went to sleep happy that our first big western National Park had provided such great and memorable environmental, geological, and cultural experiences.

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Miles traveled:	612
Departure datetime:	Monday, April 22, 8:45AM
Departure weather:	65° Sunny