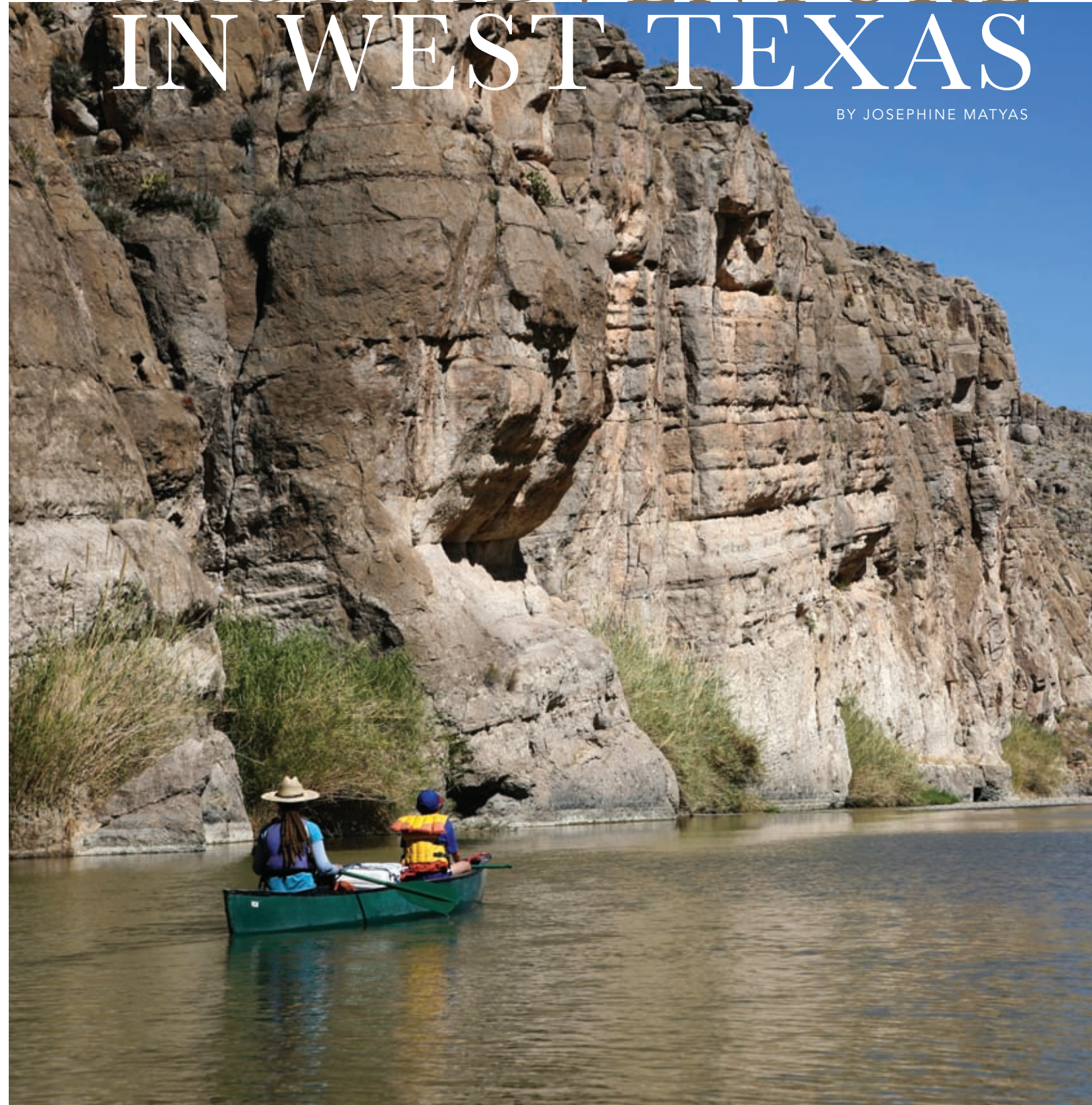


HIGH ADVENTURE IN WEST TEXAS

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS



IT'S A BIT MISLEADING TO
SAY THAT BIG BEND IS ON
THE ROAD TO NOWHERE.

O

ther than miles of blue sky, grasslands, high desert and rugged mountains, it is true there is not much along the way. But at the end of the road stands one of the continent's last frontiers—Big Bend

National Park. Locals like to joke about how the occasional car breakdown gives the population a boost. Parts and mechanics are scarce and sometimes it's easier to put down roots and stay awhile.

REMOTE WILDERNESS

Outside of Texas, Big Bend is still a well-kept secret. The park's 3,237 square kilometres of river, desert and mountains deliver solitude in a natural surrounding of some of the most heartbreakingly beautiful, uncluttered scenery in America. No one comes to Big Bend by accident. It is at the tip of a dead-end roadway; the nearest town of any size is a two-hour drive and the closest airport is almost four hours away.

The "bend" in the park's name comes from the sharp turn the Rio Grande River takes, where it embraces the dry Chihuahuan Desert and the jagged Chisos Mountains in the crook of the curve. It's the only spot in America where an entire mountain range is contained within the boundary of a single park. The water of the Rio Grande is the lifeblood that etches the southern boundary of Big Bend National Park, tracing the line between Texas and Mexico.

I was in Big Bend to hike the desert and paddle the silty brown Rio Grande River, both of which are perfect ways to explore this timeless and remote side of West Texas.

NAVIGATING THE RIO GRANDE

When we pushed our loaded canoes from the shoreline—Texas on the left, Mexico on the right—it was the start of a journey along the only body of water that travels almost 200 kilometres in any direction. Over eons, the gentle Rio Grande has stubbornly refused to flow around mesas and mountain ranges, slicing instead through layers of ancient rock to create gorges, canyons and whitewater that is a hook for canoeists and rafters. Our river trip took us through the 12 kilometres of Santa Elena Canyon, the deepest and most popular of the park's three gorges. Once the canyon's sheer limestone walls envelop you, the only break from rock and water is the thin slice of blue sky overhead.

The rugged landscape of
Big Bend National Park is
breathtakingly beautiful.
istockphoto.com

Our group prepares for our run through whitewater at the Rock Slide rapids on the Rio Grande River. Josephine Matyas



THE RUN THROUGH ROCK SLIDE WAS NERVE-RACKING, BUT EXHILARATING, AND I WAS IMMEDIATELY HOOKED.

The first day of paddling was a teaser. Just to stop the canoe from bouncing from one country to another, stay clear of the dozens of turtles and try to keep all the gear more or less dry was challenging enough. The river starts slow, a mixture of flat water, small rapids and shallow spots where we dragged our canoes through rocky shoals. The Class I and Class II rapids were just small riffles, but Day 1 was only a training ground for the larger Rock Slide rapids that waited farther downriver.

Our first day ended too quickly as we dragged our loaded canoes onto the Texas side of the river and unpacked our gear at a level spot nicknamed Entrance Camp. A short hike to the top of the mesa was in order before tucking into a grilled dinner of steak and salmon washed down by a twilight toast of Merlot. As if on cue, we were treated to a classic Texan sunset, and we sat back and watched the cliff walls change from orange to brick-red and finally to a dark inky outline.

Four types of rattlesnakes, scorpions and tarantulas the size of drink coasters all call Big Bend home, however nothing could stop me from sleeping outdoors and watching the slow movement of the constellations and the occasional shooting star streak across the desert sky.

In the morning, we let the Rio Grande lethargically drift our canoes into the gaping

entrance of Santa Elena. Soaring 460 metres high, the canyon walls would tower over all of Toronto's skyscrapers, blocking out all cell phone, satellite or GPS signals. Our river guide told us a story of having to splint a limb and paddle the injured traveller to the take-out point 10 hours away.

At Rock Slide rapids a maze of huge limestone boulders choked the river, creating a swirl of dubious turns and churning eddies. Rocks the size of small trucks were impossible to see around; the river guides scouted the water ahead, then doled out specific instructions about navigating the waters. The run through Rock Slide was nerve-racking, but exhilarating, and I was immediately hooked. If we could have turned around and gone back upstream to run them again, I would have been first in line.

The big run of whitewater was done, but Santa Elena Canyon was not yet finished with me. The pulse-quickening rapids suddenly poured out into the quietest part of the canyon—a stretch of several kilometres where the walls rise to even more impossible heights and the slope of the rock layers creates an optical illusion that made it seem as though we were paddling downhill.

In the silence, I stretched out each paddle stroke, savouring the remaining minutes, thinking that somehow I could find a way to cheat time and stay on this river a little longer. ■

TRAVEL PLANNER

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