



36 HOURS

Marfa, Texas



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By Shannon Sims Photographs by Jessica Lutz

Shannon Sims, a Texan and longtime contributor to the Travel section, is based in Houston.

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Deep in the high desert of Far West Texas, an hour’s drive from the Mexican border, sits a little jewel: Marfa. The rural town of less than 2,000 residents, about three hours from El Paso or Midland, is a former water stop along the railroad that runs across Texas. Despite its remoteness, over the past half-century Marfa has become one of the country’s top art towns, set off by the 1971 arrival of the artist Donald Judd, who found inspiration in the area’s stirring bleakness. Today the town offers a siren song to travelers intrigued by its blend of dusty cowboy culture, high-brow art and wide-open horizon (including those tacking Marfa onto a trip to Big Bend National Park). The walkable town, which stays relatively cool thanks to an altitude not much lower than Denver’s, boasts artistic riches and quirky shops, plus nationally acclaimed restaurants. Consider the celestial calendar before booking a trip: The area is known for having some of the darkest skies in the country, and you can expect to leave Marfa starstruck.

Recommendations

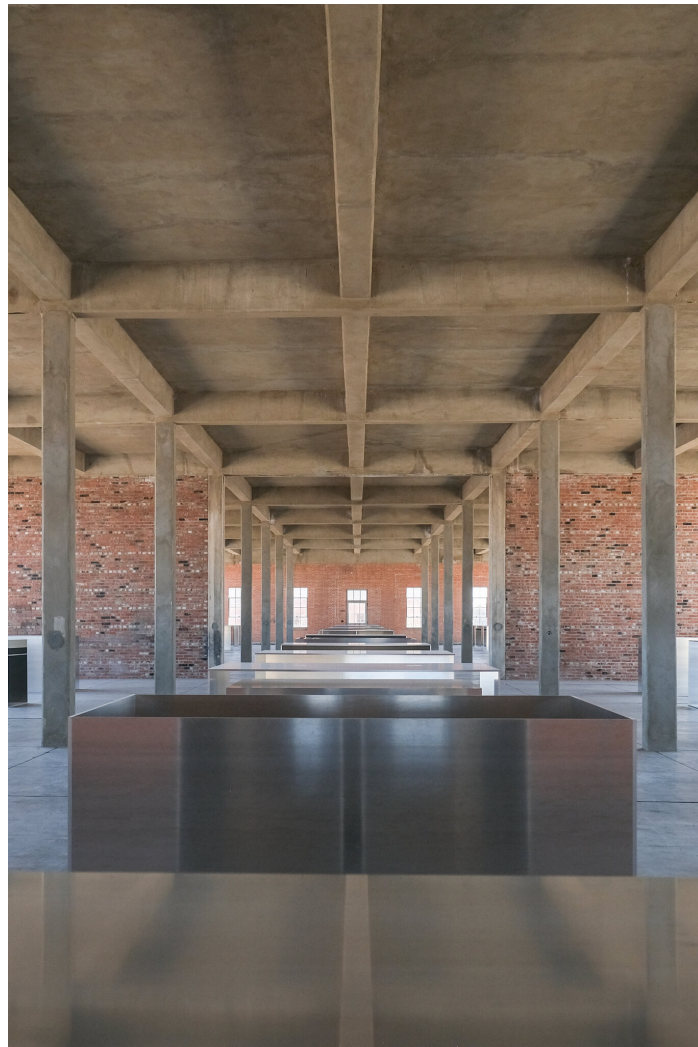
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|---|---|
| Key stops | – |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Chinati Foundation, a contemporary art museum, showcases the work of the artist Donald Judd and his contemporaries.• At an evening Star Party in the open-air arena of the University of Texas's McDonald Observatory, in the Davis Mountains north of Marfa, astronomers take visitors on a tour through the night sky via laser light.• Downtown Marfa, the walkable heart of town, brims with modern art galleries and unique stores. | |
| Attractions and outdoor activities | + |
| Restaurants and bars | + |
| Shopping | + |
| Where to stay | + |
| Getting there and getting around | + |

Itinerary

Friday

2:30 p.m. **Meditate with 100 boxes**

In the 1970s, the American artist Donald Judd moved to Marfa and redefined the town, turning it into an art destination. He created the Chinati Foundation, a contemporary art museum that highlights his work along with that of his contemporaries, including the sculptor John Chamberlain and the light artist Dan Flavin; more recent artists exhibited include the photographer and sculptor Zoe Leonard. Tours are available but the works you'll see vary, so call the foundation to find out more (\$15 to \$30 with reservation). A popular Judd installation is inside artillery hangars once used by German prisoners of war. His "100 untitled works in mill aluminum" – in essence, row upon row of metal boxes – reflect the natural light in intriguing ways, creating a meditative experience. It's the perfect way to quiet the mind and embrace Marfa's slow pace.



Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

5 p.m. **Get happy (hour) downtown**

Set the unplugged Marfa mood by enjoying a drink and live music at one of the courtyard tables at Jett's Grill in the Hotel Paisano. Try the carajillo (\$14), a chilled coffee cocktail, or a prickly pear Moscow mule (\$14). Just around the corner, sample hard-to-find Texas wines like an orange muscat from the high plains (\$22 a bottle) and nibble on dressed-up plates of tinned fish (from \$16) at

Alta Marfa. In the morning, it's a coffee shop called Mutual Friends, but in the evening it transforms into a casual wine bar. If you prefer your beverages to go, don't miss Cactus Liquors, a delightful local liquor store with an excellent selection of Mexican mezcals – a great Marfa souvenir.

7 p.m. **Sample invasive antelope and wild boar**

Arrive hungry at Cochineal, the most acclaimed restaurant in town. Some people visit Marfa just to taste delicate plates of local protein by the executive chef Alexandra Gates, a James Beard award semifinalist several times over. Try the tartar of wild-hunted Nilgai antelope (\$28) and crispy trout with artichokes and lemon (\$36), or go all-in on the chef's tasting menu (\$125), which can feature quail and Texas wild boar. Don't miss the artisan bread course, served with garlic confit and sage salt (\$12 a quarter loaf), which has earned a fanatical following. The meat-forward menu includes vegan options like a local mushroom risotto (\$34) and a chai custard (\$16). Reservations should be made far ahead of time; pick a table in the gravel courtyard for a breezy evening.



Southwest free range bison at Cochineal

9 p.m. **Squint for magical ghost lights**

Are they real? Or imagined? Whether or not you're a believer, attempting to view the Marfa Lights is a popular, almost essential experience in Far West Texas. About a 10-minute drive out of town along the side of the highway, there's an outdoor viewing area (free) where you can sit on benches and gaze across the prairie to see what's out there. Those who claim to have seen the lights (including many locals) describe them as ethereal orbs of white, blue, yellow or red that may wobble, conjoin or split, and that are best seen during the hour before sunrise or the hour after sunset. More concrete thinkers say they are caused by highway headlights distorted in the dry desert air. There's no guarantee of a sighting, and that's part of the fun.



Even if you don't see the Marfa Lights from this viewing station along Highway 90, the view of Cathedral Mountain is worth the drive.

Saturday

8:30 a.m. **Belly up for burritos**

Behind a scraggly wall just south of town sits one of Marfa's most popular breakfast joints, and a place where the town's proximity to the Mexican border can be felt. Led by the charismatic Ramona Tejada, whose face is plastered on a cheeky poster with the greeting "Hola Chicos Guapos" (Hello Handsome Guys), Marfa Burritos turns out simple but tasty breakfast burritos with ingredients like red sauce pork asado (\$10) or egg and chorizo (\$9). (Vegetarians can customize.) It may seem like an undiscovered dive, but it's been visited by celebrities like Matthew McConaughey and Anthony Bourdain. Sit in the homey dining

room, or chat with locals in the front as you wait for your breakfast to go. Need something stronger than drip coffee? Check out Coyote Coffee down the road.



Ramona Tejada serving up a burrito

10 a.m. **Shop around and grab a bite**

Downtown Marfa offers numerous eccentric shops and high quality art galleries, but most galleries open at noon, so shop first. Raba Marfa sells hard-to-find Western wear, both vintage (orange cowboy boots, \$200) and new (Mongolian sheep jacket, \$800). Garza Marfa offers Southwestern home goods, like striped desert blankets (\$230) and saddle leather armchairs (\$2,500). Pick up some local literature or work on a puzzle at Stop & Read Books. For accessories like bolo ties and belt buckles, try Texas Rose. If you're feeling peckish, grab a jalapeño chicken sandwich from Aster Cafe and Bakery (\$17) or a garlicky kale and ricotta pizza from Para Llevar (\$18).



Ceramics by Mimi y Roberto at Garza Marfa

2 p.m. **Explore history and modern art**

In the early 20th century, Mexican-American children were segregated from their white counterparts and educated in Marfa's Blackwell School. In 2022, the adobe schoolhouse became a national historic site open to visitors. Then pivot into an exploration of Marfa's art galleries (many of which are only open on Saturdays from noon to 5 p.m.). Pick up a free Marfa Gallery Guide (available at many local businesses) and take a stroll around town. With rotating exhibitions at most stops, you never know what you'll find; Rule Gallery and Wrong Marfa are two small standouts. The most memorable might be Ballroom Marfa, a multi-space gallery that helped commission Prada Marfa, an art installation 30 minutes outside of town that's a faux outlet of the luxury brand, complete with shoes on display. On the road to the Prada Marfa is the artist John Cerney's roadside "Giant Marfa" mural depicting scenes from the movie.

6 p.m. **Saddle up to a horseshoe bar**

Although it's on the first floor of a downtown historic building, dinner at Margaret's in Marfa feels more like eating on grandma's porch, complete with a clattering wood-framed screen door. The food is suitably homey yet elevated. Deviled eggs take a delicious dip in beet brine (\$9), braised cabbage gets kicked up by garlic chili oil (\$10), and a classic Bolognese pasta benefits from rich, 100 percent Texas beef (\$19). Although there are tables, Margaret's horseshoe-shaped bar acts as the communal gathering table, where visitors and locals rub shoulders and share tips about their favorite art galleries. For a solo traveler, it's a gold mine.



8:45 p.m. **Attend a star party**

In the Davis Mountains, about a 45-minute drive (best accompanied by the sounds of Marfa Public Radio), the University of Texas's McDonald Observatory is a great way to experience the dark skies of rural Far West Texas and learn about astronomy at the same time. On many weekend nights, the observatory hosts a two-hour Star Party (\$25), where visitors settle into an open-air amphitheater for an engaging, laser-light-guided tour through the

stars. Afterward, check out the various telescopes focused on planets and other celestial bodies. Experts are on hand to answer any questions.

11 p.m. **Orbit Marfa's favorite planet**

If you hear music breaking the nighttime silence of Marfa, it's probably drifting from Planet Marfa, an outdoor live music venue that turns into Marfa's gathering spot on weekend evenings; it's the kind of place where you're likely to see your lunchtime waiter or tour guide. The hideout has multiple environments, like a room filled with games, a wigwam with an underground Ping-Pong table and many cozy canoodling corners. The music varies as much as the space: One evening might feature a D.J. playing EDM; the next might turn into a cumbia dance party. The kitchen offers a small menu of late-night munchies, like roasted vegetable pizza (\$15) and nutella and mascarpone sandwiches (\$8). Plus, free peanuts.





The West Texas Adventure Company offers customizable horseback tours.

Sunday

10 a.m. **Walk the “Block”**

While the Chinati Foundation highlights the work of Judd, his contemporaries and newer artists, the Judd Foundation focuses on preserving his living and working spaces. Even if you’re not a Judd fan, La Mansana de Chinati/The Block is a fascinating display of what artists can do when the wide open spaces of Marfa allow them to stretch. In the shadow of a historic industrial feed mill, surrounded by a wall made of adobe bricks, Judd, who died in 1994, turned an entire block into his home and studio. During a guided tour (\$30, one hour and 45 minutes), visitors see his vast libraries, his bedroom and many of his three-dimensional works.



Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

12 p.m. **Transport to Italy**

Most people don't travel to Far West Texas for perfectly sliced bresaola or creamy stracciatella, which is what makes Bordo such a blissful find. Run by the chef-owner Michael Anthony Serva, the restaurant makes its own pasta (\$14 a bag dried, if you want to take some home) and gelato (\$6 a scoop), and wood-fires bread in the dining room. With lunch-only hours and a focus on sandwiches, the restaurant-slash-deli seems casual enough; the former service station embraces Marfa's hardscrabble aesthetic of corrugated tin and cafeteria trays. But the food, like a sandwich of prosciutto cotto and Gorgonzola (\$14) or a radiatori pesto pasta with fresh ricotta (\$15), is extraordinary. Word is getting out: this year the James Beard Foundation ranked Mr. Serva among the top chefs in the country.



Michael Anthony Serva

Cover image: "Giant Marfa" by John Cerney

Correction: April 24, 2025

An earlier version of this story misidentified the bookstore that offers a puzzle table. It is Stop & Read Books, not Marfa Book Co.