

# MARATHON RUN

For Texas road-trippers heading to Big Bend or Marfa, tiny Marathon has long been a favorite pit stop. [Susan L. Ebert](#) rediscovers a quaint town worth its own pilgrimage

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER BOOMER

AS SHAFTS OF SUNLIGHT PEEK OVER THE ADOBE courtyard walls, I snuggle deeper into the bur-nished, Mexican leather equipale chair outside my room's door and lift a steaming mug of coffee to my lips. A male Anna's hummingbird, recognizable by his brilliant magenta throat, dips his beak into a

trumpet flower in the banquet of blooms surrounding me. As the emerging dawn illuminates the inner courtyard, countless more hummingbirds buzz amid the blooms in a high-speed ballet of iridescent color and speed.

Los Portales at the Gage Hotel might well be my favorite place to awaken, and I'm not alone: When Condé Nast Traveler tallied up its 2015 Readers' Choice Awards, the list-topper for "Best Hotel in Texas" wasn't Dallas' famed Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek. Nor was it the regal La Mansión del Rio on the San Antonio River Walk. And the legendary Hotel Paisano in Marfa — which hosted Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean during the filming of *Giant* — didn't even bust into the top 15.

Nope. The Gage Hotel, in the remote, unincorporated town of Marathon (population 430) at the foothills of the Glass Mountains, waltzed off with top honors, and for any of us who cherish staying there, the reason's as clear as the west Texas sky. "I think it's the entirety of the atmosphere here — and not just the hotel itself," says the Gage's Ann Urban as we stroll through the recently renovated property, and I wholeheartedly agree.

Back in my grad school days at the University of Texas at Austin, Marathon meant a mere gas-up stop on U.S. Route 385 before being swallowed up in Big Bend National Park's 800,000-plus acreage where 385 dead-ends. But when a friend of mine,

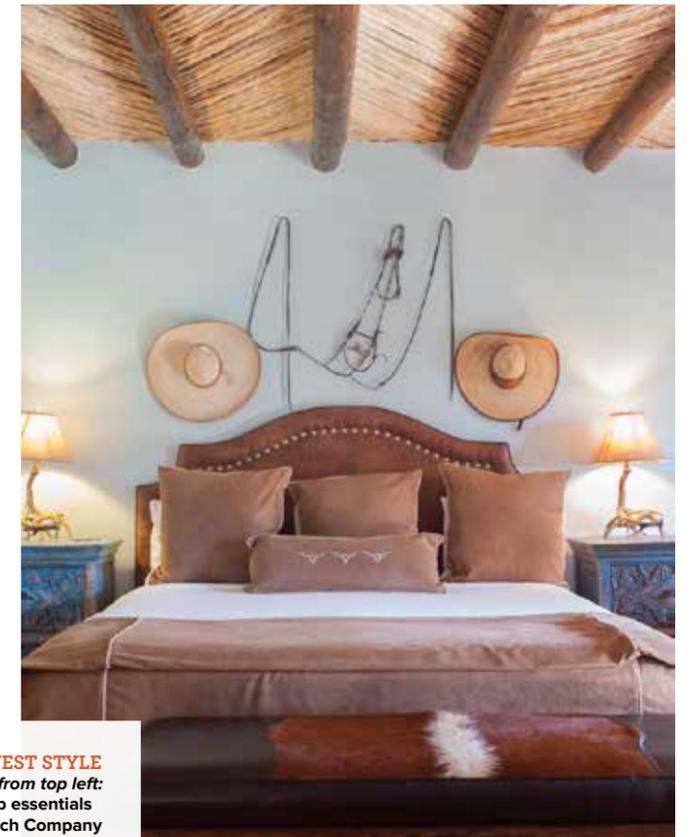
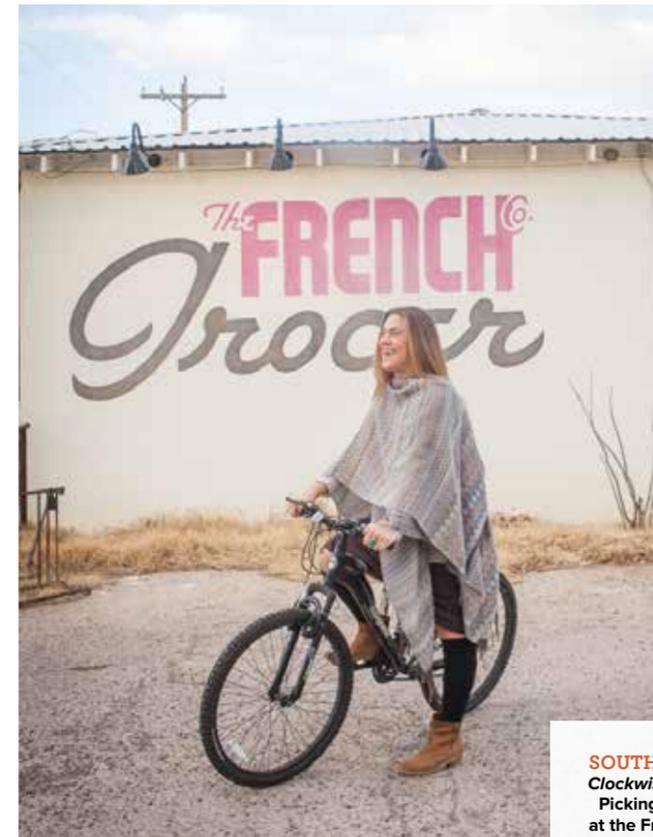
E. Dan Klepper, moved there in 2002, I began to linger a bit longer each time I'd pass through. Marathon's unpretentious charms disarmed me: I no longer just blaze on by, but stop to savor its quirky-yet-unpretentious character.

I should go thank him, I think as I gulp the last of my coffee, and set out to do so.

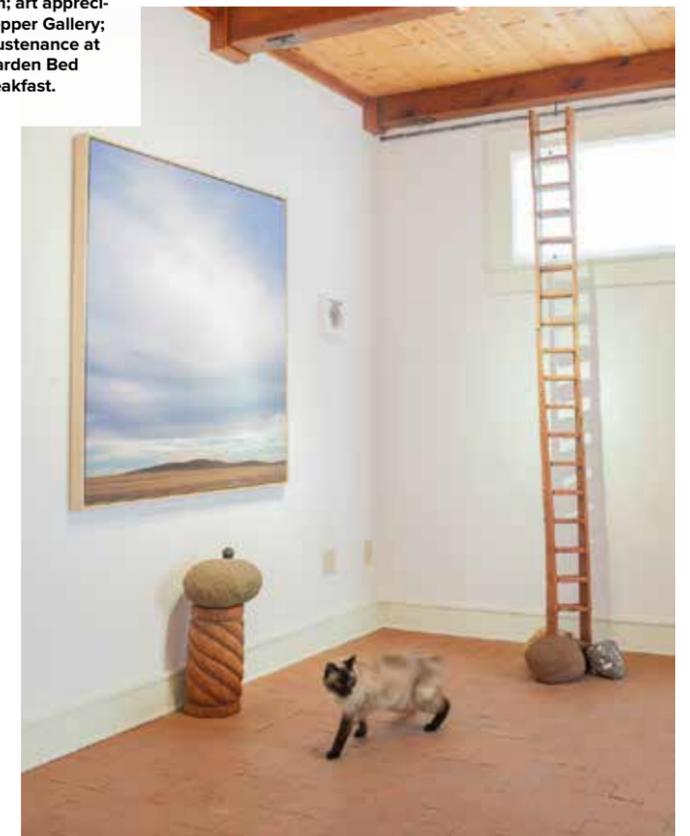
Just around the corner from the Gage, Klepper's gallery on Avenue D sits diagonally across from the French Company Grocer. I step past the sleek Starfire convertible at the curb (which looks as out of place in this rough country as would Mikhail Baryshnikov at a rodeo), shout a "howdy" through the door, and Klepper comes striding out. "I know," he says with a shrug, noting my quizzical glance at the sleek ebony machine. "Bought it down in Presidio — really good price."

Atmosphere — how Urban described the Gage — defines Klepper's current gallery works. He digitally processes the images he wrests from his camera, then transfers them to massive canvases. Standing close to one, the freeze frame of the ethereal, ephemeral space between earth and sky seems to enwreath you much as does the Big Bend vista that inspired it.

Strolling back along the main street I pop into another gallery, that of photographer James H. Evans, who left Austin in 1988 to make Marathon his home. His gallery gleams with images gleaned from his decades-long love affair with Big Bend and its inhabitants — some human, others avian, mammalian and even reptilian. His Big Bend National Park photography is of such fine caliber that Ansel Adams' son, George, now in his 80s, sought out Evans to accompany him on an extensive tour of the park. Also for sale in the Evans Gallery are works from local artists and the charming Desert Critter Wear line, a project of Evans' and his partner, Marci Roberts. (If Evans isn't



**SOUTHWEST STYLE**  
Clockwise from top left: Picking up essentials at the French Company Grocer; the Gage Hotel's Texas charm; art appreciation at Klepper Gallery; morning sustenance at Eve's Garden Bed & Breakfast.



**ROAD AHEAD**  
Next stop for many  
travelers passing  
through Marathon:  
Texas' Big Bend  
National Park.



there, call the number on the handwritten note on the door: His studio's just a block away.)

Evans isn't Marathon's senior artist-in-residence, though; that honor goes to 98-year-old artisan Maisie Lee, who moved to Marathon in 1939. As Lee, who has been carving evocative, primitive figures on wooden doors for nearly seven decades, is semi-retired, Evans and I stroll over to Marathon Coffee, which is run by her daughter-in-law Nancy, so I can admire one of her more recent works.

Having awakened at 5 a.m., I'm famished after a busy morning. And having consumed a colossal cheeseburger (along with fries and two glasses of a fine malbec, mind you) the evening before at the Gage's White Buffalo Bar, I opt for a bit lighter fare and amble over to Roberts' French Company Grocer.

An architect by trade, Marci Roberts purchased the then-flagging grocery in 2006 and relentlessly pursued the perfect structure for a portable sandwich, swapping in crisp red pepper for soggy tomatoes and a snappy jalapeño for the obligatory pickle. A sheaf about an inch thick of iceberg lettuce provides a satisfying crunch. Today's choice: smoked peppered turkey.

Roberts stocks Big Bend necessities from sunscreen, hats, hiking socks and guidebooks to a gleaming high-end Yeti cooler and a nicely curated selection of wines and organic foods. And if that's not enough to keep her busy, she's involved with ongoing architectural projects and a driving force behind the Marathon Foundation, which

recently scored big with the donation to the Marathon school district of a 24-inch Dobsonian telescope by the University of Texas' McDonald Observatory. Marathon rates a Class One on the Bortle Dark-Sky Scale for its studded skies. "Marathon's not trying to be anything else," she tells me, in obvious reference to the art mecca to the north, Marfa. "We're just trying to make life better here."

Sandwich stashed in my bag, I jump in the Jeep for a 5-mile jaunt out Post Road to Post Park for a picnic alongside Peña Colorado Springs, arguably one of the best birding sites in Texas. Greeting me at the gate is a group of more than 30 jakes — year-old males that are the turkey equivalent of mischievous teenage boys — and as I stroll among the cottonwoods to find a spot for my snack, a covey of quail explodes from the brush at my feet. As I dine, vermilion flycatchers swoop from the branches above to nab insects and dart back into the boughs.

Later, I indulge myself with a deep-tissue massage at the Gage Spa, then take Klepper's recommendation to spend the night at Eve's Garden Bed & Breakfast. "The breakfasts are incredible," he says.

And he's right. Eve's — a fantastic concoction of original structures, straw-bale buildings and papercrete painted in exuberant south-of-the-border hues — surrounds a lush inner courtyard garden where the Mad Hatter would be right at home hosting a tea party. In the morning, I amble to the kitchen, where a sunrise feast of lemon-ricotta pancakes is accompanied by organic yogurt, fresh fruit and locally produced sausage. Over breakfast, I met a group of gal-pals who dub themselves the Adventure Divas. "We come here every year," says one, "to stargaze, to hike, to shop — and simply to restore ourselves."

Seems I'm not the only one who's discovered the joys of a Marathon run. ☀

#### SHOP:

### MARATHON MUSTS

#### Evans Gallery

James Evans' iconic images, plus notecards and art by George Zupp, Joe Vancho and Paul Wiggins. 21 S. First St.

#### Klepper Gallery

Gallery works and books by E. Dan Klepper and sculptures by Mary Baxter. 105 N. Ave. D

#### French Company Grocer

No doubt this well-curated shop has that missing item needed to make your Big Bend adventure complete, from organic foods and fresh-baked cookies to wine and beer. 206 N. Ave. D

#### V6 Collection

Not "just" the Gage Hotel gift shop, this eclectic mix of one-of-a-kind treasures includes furniture, home décor, tabletop, wall art, and chandeliers so you can bring a bit of the Big Bend home. 102 NW First St.

#### The Rusty Rabbit

Rummage around among the antiques, estate jewelry, original artwork, rustic furniture and collectibles. 103 NW First St.

#### Pitaya Verde

Modern, Southwest-inspired clothing from Double D Ranchwear and 4 Love & Liberty by Johnny Was. 107 NW First St.

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