

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T PASS UP EL PASO

If you're ready for an off-the-beaten-path adventure, here's a Texas treasure that's worth the effort.

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARY WELCH

Top Left: "Harmony en la Esquina," by Gaspar Enriquez, hangs in the lobby of the El Paso Museum of Art.

Top Right: A few relics from the desert on display at the Cattleman's Steakhouse.

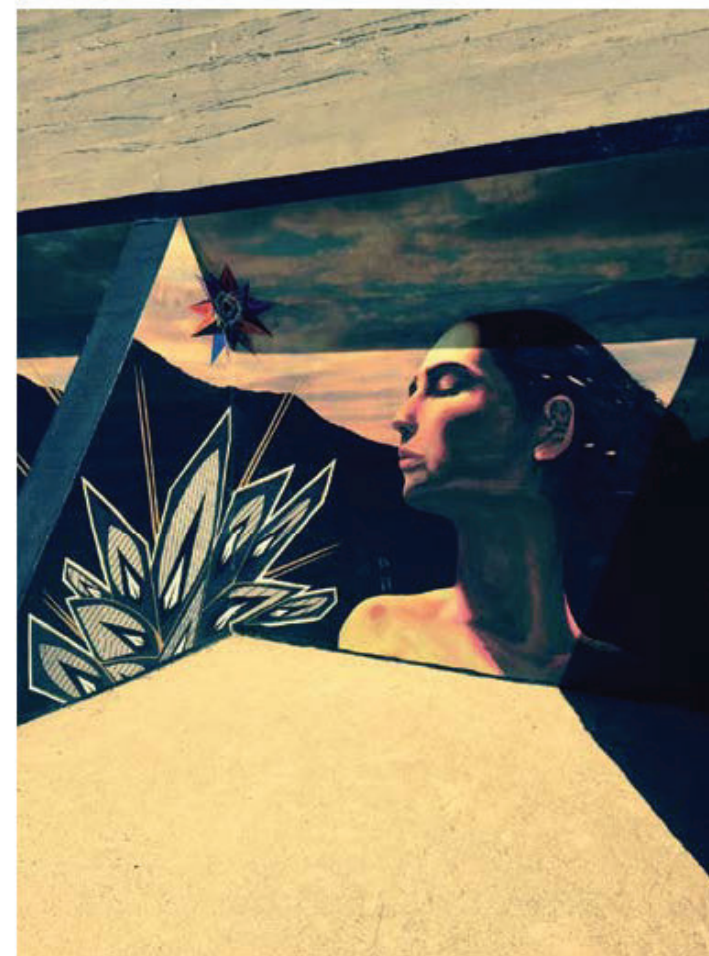
Bottom Left: A beautiful mural decorates a bridge underpass.

The mascot of El Paso's minor league baseball team is the Chihuahuas — and the tiny dog with the outgoing personality is an appropriate symbol for this Texas city as well. Like its canine counterpart, El Paso is often overlooked in favor of flashier cities such as San Antonio, Austin or Dallas. But it is a vibrant, energetic place that packs a lot into a small area and has much to offer anyone who chooses to spend time getting to know it.

CELEBRATING THE ARTS

Several years ago a coalition of civic and business leaders decided to lead a revitalization effort centered on downtown and the arts. Bonds were issued that paid for parks, pools, a children's museum, a Hispanic cultural center and a performing arts center. Today, shops and restaurants are filling in abandoned spaces and the central business district glows with outdoor art, painted underpasses, pop up crafts stores and new businesses.

Feeding off this energy, the city also has embraced its past and celebrates its history and culture with festivals — lots of festivals. Hardly a week goes by without a major cultural or musical festival taking place — and always with plenty of food. Some of the biggest festivals are the Amigo Airshow, one of the top 10 airshows in the country, the KLAQ Great River Race, Fiesta de las Flores, the oldest Hispanic festival in the Southeast, the El Paso Downtown Street Festival, and the unique Texas Showdown Fest that calls itself the world's largest tattoo and music festival.



Another showcase of El Paso's art-centered attitude was the saving of the Plaza Theatre, which was built in 1930, and housed the last remaining Wurlitzer Balaban III organ. A public/private partnership saved the theatre from becoming a parking lot. It reopened in 2006 and is home to visiting Broadway shows and other concerts. When we were there we saw *Wicked* and the whole experience was exquisite. We dined under a tent on the square, went into the theatre and during intermission, went back on the square for drinks.

Also downtown is the Southwest University Park where the feisty Chihuahuas play. The park is made for family fun, with a play area and a water area so that kids (and adults!) can cool off during the seventh inning stretch. From the ballpark, you can walk to several nearby museums, with our favorite being the El Paso Museum of Art, that houses more than 7,000 works of art, including a number of Mexican pieces. Another must-see is the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center, one of 13 free-standing Holocaust museums in the country and the only fully bilingual one.

Perhaps the most unique attraction is the El Paso Museum of History's Digie, which stands for Digital Information Gateway in El Paso. It's better known as the Digital Wall. It's mind-blowing. This is a digital history of El Paso and its people, created by the people. People are free to upload family photos to the wall, which are added to the city's history. Then you can search the collection of images and videos by adding a few key words such as names, locations or dates. Just like on a computer, you can narrow your search and find a picture of the 1955 Cathedral



Top left: Aztec Calendar Pavilion, created by L.A.-based artistic collective PoeticKinetics, is a stand-alone sculpture created by the City of El Paso Public Art Program. An outhouse is (thankfully) a distant memory at the Cattleman's Steakhouse.

High School Band, what your husband's great-grandmother looked like or the earliest settlers. It was amazing just watching people search for people and places and then delight in their findings.

WINE AND STEAK

Two of our favorite jaunts were outside the city. To the west is Zin Valle Vineyards, the area's only vineyard and winery. We enjoyed a complementary wine tasting and relaxed on the patio that overlooks the vineyards and the Franklin Mountains. We especially loved the Rising Star pinot noir, red zinfandel, and the sparkling wine, and when we say we loved them, we loved them so much that we ordered them and had them sent back home. Not all of the grapes used are grown at the vineyard; many are sourced elsewhere, including from Ted Turner's nearby New Mexico vineyard.

Our other favorite venture was about 35 minutes from downtown into the desert, to the Cattleman's Steakhouse at Indian Cliffs Ranch. The Cattleman looks like a movie set,

and in fact, it has been one! Several Westerns, including *The Border*, *Courage Under Fire* and *Glory Road*, were shot on the grounds. There is an authentic western town — and a working ranch — with donkey rides, a children's zoo and snake pit, old wagon shop and stables with horses, buffalo, cattle and long horns. But the main attraction is the Cattleman's Steakhouse, described by *Men's Health* as the "manliest steakhouse in America," where everything is Texas style, meaning big. The Cowboy T-bone weighs in at two pounds and the lobster tail is about 12 ounces!

Like the scrappy Chihuahua, El Paso realized that it was not a top-of-mind Texas city to visitors and hadn't fully capitalized on its history, traditions and landmarks like its Texan brethren to the east. While El Paso may not have a River Walk, nor the Alamo, it does have plenty of authentic experiences to delight visitors who want a visit to the Old West with maybe a little less flash and commercialism. Get there before the secret's out! *tg*

El Paso Fun Facts

-The city was a major transportation hub for the Southern Pacific, Texas and Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads. Not only did the railroads attract new industries and settlers but also Asian workers who came to build the railroads. Many stayed, hence there's an Asian influence in the local Mexican-American dishes.

-When it comes to condiments, there are more options than Old El Paso salsa! Several local food companies are worth trying out, such as Claude's Barbecue Brisket sauce, Tank's Premium Rimmer & Seasonings

and Bloody Mary Mix, Great American Land & Cattle Co. steak 'n meat seasoning and Salsa Del Rio's Desert Pepper salsa.

-El Paso is a border city. Right across the Rio Grande River is the Mexican town of Juarez and every day workers and visitors on both sides of the border either drive or walk over to visit or work. It is also adjacent to New Mexico and only about 230 miles to Albuquerque. An additional 30 or so miles will put you in Tucson, AZ. In fact, the city is closer to Phoenix than it is to Fort Worth (by about 200 miles!).



Zin Valley Vineyards

"THOSE WERE HARD TIMES, BUT I LOVED LIVING THERE. I WOULD WALK ON THE TRACKS, HOPPING, SKIPPING. I ENJOYED THE NEIGHBORHOOD, I ENJOYED EL PASO. I REMEMBER BEING CHASED BY TUMBLEWEEDS ON WINDY DAYS; THEY CAME UP TO MY NECK."

-Debbie Reynolds