



Land Down Under

AN UPLIFTING DAY IN BIG BEND

text by **Barbara Rodriguez** illustration by **Michael Witte**

THAT GREAT BIG PARK DOWN IN THE yawning western expanse of our state is a gift for which every Texan should drop in to say thank you at least once in a lifetime. Always, a Big Bend road tour is best enjoyed by the patient, the subtle, the opportunistic. In the summer, to travel in the Texas outback is to test your mettle, but the rest of the year, when the rains come and the cacti bloom, the region can be surprisingly lush, even mellow.

Driving along the bone-jarring backroads of the national park, I feel as if I have earned the delights at trail's end. In a couple of hours you can drive to the mouth of Santa Elena Canyon and, at the end of a short climb, stand in a timeless gap between sheer cliffs that crimp the sky into a ribbon as narrow as the river lapping below you.

It would seem ridiculous to try to see Big Bend in a day. Yet, so irresistible are the park's sirens that heading west on to business in El Paso I have more than once found myself pulled from the interstate, powerless to resist them. If I only have a day, I may begin at the Visitors Center just to see what guided nature walks are on the schedule or investigate what birds I might expect to appear. But most

of all I want to make my way quickly over to Santa Elena.

Toward the end of the day I will drive to Hot Springs, a one-time health resort partially swallowed by the river. On days when the Rio Grande is running low, you can soak in the 105-degree water as it bubbles into the ruins of a turn-of-the-century bathhouse.

Not to be missed is the sunset at Rio Grande Village, a campground oasis beneath the ruffled skirts of the Sierra del Carmen. As the sun dips, the Mexican mountains blush a vivid pink, bruise violet, and then glow a brassy gold. I like to watch the show from the banks of the mud-gargling river. Beavers float by silently, until—startled by some movement—they'll slap the water in a beaver-tail high five and disappear with the sun.

The park is a decompression chamber, the nearest interstate light-years away, the embrace of mountains somehow both familiar and strange creating a land free of cares. Always I know too soon I will have to make the climb up and out to I-10, a long drive illuminated by stars and headlights. But

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any time I can put real life on hold one more day, I do. ★

Find Babs Rodriguez's full adventure at texashighways.com/matters.



Enduring *Love*

CADDO LAKE'S PRIMORDIAL LURE

text by **Barbara Rodriguez** illustration by **Michael Witte**

I LOVE THE SUBTLE CHARMS OF EAST TEXAS. Like the best relationships, it's an affection that developed over time, rooted in many discoveries.

My parents made at least one camping trip a year to Lone Star Lake or Lake O' the Pines. When I broadened my explorations as an adult, I was astonished that my father—an avid outdoorsman and fisherman—never took us to Caddo Lake. I'll never know whether it wasn't on his radar or if he just didn't want to share it. I'd understand if it was the latter. There's something so mysterious about Caddo, so otherworldly, that you don't easily invite others into your relationship.

The appeal of the lake is as much about its inaccessibility—free public access is limited to one ramp—as it is about the mysteries in its history. Go visit, and you know at once you can never possess Caddo the way regular visitors feel ownership of, say, Possum Kingdom or Lakes Livingston or Whitney. Shallow depths, labyrinthine boat roads, moldering duck blinds, falling timber, and flora that blooms, sprawls, and climbs at preternatural rates mean the lake you see today is not necessarily the lake you get tomorrow. To characterize Caddo is like describing an elephant viewed through small holes in a fence—with the mammoth leaning

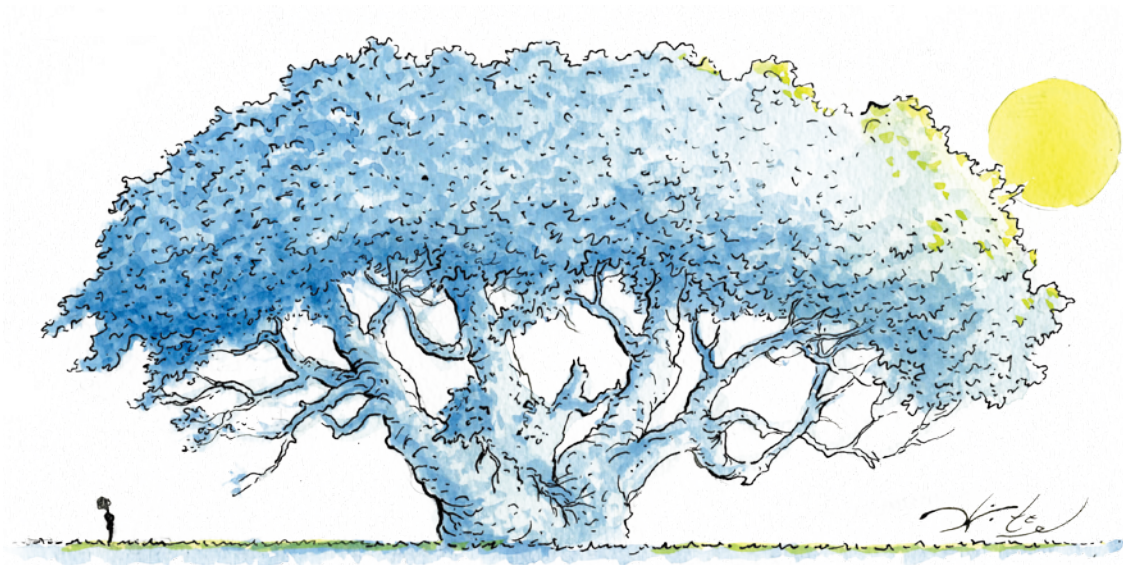
on the fence. Wide views are hard to come by; you are limited to peep shows through the humpy knees and elbows of cypress, nets of Spanish moss, and reflections in amber waters. Observation requires a keen sense of what is beyond the slivered sightlines.

Separating myth from reality is equally difficult. Though consistently labeled the only natural lake in Texas, it's not. Unlike most Texas lakes, it has a past, one shaded by tall tales and time. Where and when did it begin? Some say that in the beginning there were earthquakes. Others tell of a Great Flood borne of a Great Raft leading to a Big Bang—of sorts. Others claim it all began when the Fairy and Sodo lakes flooded (now less romantically known as the Ferry and Soda lakes).

The unknowable is central to the ongoing attraction of the maze of bayous, bogs, sloughs, and backwaters sprawling along the border between Harrison and Marion counties in Texas and Caddo Parish in Louisiana. That's fine with me. I get my Dad's reluctance to share, too. As Jane Austen wrote in *Emma*, "If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more." ★

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Folk Tales

LOCAL STORIES OFTEN MAKE THE BEST SOUVENIRS

text by **Barbara Rodriguez** illustration by **Michael Witte**

THERE ARE THINGS YOU EXPECT TO discover when you travel: new restaurants, unfamiliar expressions, obscure attractions. I like to search out peoples' stories. Some are small and quiet. Others are ripsnorters. The most memorable are passionate tales of personal bests, quests, and discoveries. Near Graham about a decade ago, I found one worthy of conversion into an epic poem.

Just over an hour northwest of Fort Worth, the prairie buckles into mesas, forming a Wild West landscape that witnessed the dramas celebrated in Technicolor classics: the blazing of the Goodnight-Loving partnership, wagon raids, jail breaks, and more than one trail of tears.

My search for insights into the area's character began with a bartender, a source often steeped in local lore. I had just settled into the historic Wildcatter Ranch when, over a nightcap, the story of local booster and historian Jay Burkett unfurled. I had to meet him.

The next day, a blue-eyed and passionate Burkett came over, a scrapbook as thick as a phone book under his arm, to share his tale. From the day he first saw the wizened live oak casting a broad shadow across an Atwood Ranch cow pasture, Burkett

recognized the tree as monumental. Locals had long known about the live oak, but rancher Jack Atwood would broach no strangers ogling it. When Jack died, his widow allowed Burkett full access to the tree.

After countless phone calls to the Texas Forest Service, Burkett convinced an employee to drive out for a look-see. Several official measurements later, it was confirmed: At a height of 48 feet and a circumference of 361 inches, the Atwood Ranch tree was the largest Texas live oak in the country.

Burkett took me to see the tree during my visit. No longer elegant, split and deformed by its own weight, it was more reminiscent of a dinosaur's hobbled appendage than a tree. And yet it commanded respect.

It's possible that by now the Atwood Ranch live oak has fallen to time or lost its official title. I don't want to know, because in my memory it forever wears the crown. And the live

oak was not the only champion in the story. Here's to all the Jay Burketts who fight to create for all things deserving, one special day in the sun. ★

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