

HIT THE ROAD

CAN'T-MISS GETAWAYS



DESTINATION: FORT WORTH

Trinity Tales

Exploring Fort Worth's Trinity Trails

text by **Melissa Gaskill**

FROM MY SEAT ON THE SHADED PATIO AT Woodshed Smokehouse, the view takes in a wall of leafy green trees and rippling water that glimmers in the sun. This restaurant overlooks the Clear Fork of the Trinity River and Fort Worth's Trinity Trails, 40 miles of paved and crushed-limestone routes suitable for hikers, bikers, runners, and equestrians. The trails connect many of the city's parks and attractions, setting the stage for my week-end of outdoor recreation, dining, and relaxation—all without a car.

I've started my Trinity Trails adventure with a hearty lunch. Chef Tim Love draws on a variety



- **Houston**
4 hours
- **Austin**
3.5 hours
- **Amarillo**
5.5 hours
- **Texarkana**
3.5 hours
- **Abilene**
2.25 hours

of woods like mesquite and pecan stored in on-site sheds for his expertly grilled, roasted, and slow-cooked meats, fish, and vegetables. I order the butcher's sandwich, piled high with brisket, pulled pork, sausage, coleslaw, house pickles, and mustard, along with a side of Mexican roasted corn. It's more than adequate fuel for the bike ride ahead of me.

The Trinity River rises from four tributaries—the East Fork, Elm Fork, West Fork, and Clear Fork. Near downtown Fort Worth, the Clear Fork empties into the West Fork, which then runs toward downtown Dallas, where it meets the Elm



Fork. The East Fork starts north of Dallas, skirts east of the city, and joins the West Fork south of town. From that junction near the community of Rosser, the Trinity then flows 423 miles to the coast, making it the longest river entirely in Texas.

Historians believe Spanish explorers gave the Trinity its name in 1690. In the 1800s, steamboats plied the river carrying people and goods, including cotton. Railroads later supplanted the steamboats, and in the 1950s, a flood-control project channeled the Trinity's routes through Fort Worth and Dallas. For decades, both cities mostly ignored the tamed river, but more recently, each community has realized its recreational potential. Fort Worth developed

the Trinity River Vision, a master plan for the river, and the Tarrant Regional Water District built the Trinity Trails system as part of that plan.

Fort Worth's B-cycle bike-sharing program has 44 stations around town. Learn more and sign up for the program at <https://fortworth.bcycle.com>.

My meaty sandwich devoured, I check out a bicycle at the B-cycle station next to the restaurant and head out to explore the network of trails. I ride toward downtown, about three miles away, slipping under bridges, past forests of sycamores, willows, oaks, red-buds, and junipers, and in the water,



herons, egrets, ducks, and turtles. The trail traverses Trinity Park, home to a duck pond, several playgrounds, and a fishing pier. As the Forest Park Miniature Railroad train crosses the trail, I stop briefly as passengers wave merrily.

I detour through the park, leave my trusty two-wheeler at another B-cycle station, and walk a short distance to the Fort Worth Botanic Garden. This jewel features more than 2,500 species of plants in 23 themed gardens—rose, Japanese, fragrance, perennial, seasonal, and water conservation among them—as well as a conservatory. I opt for the Texas Native Forest Boardwalk, an elevated path with platforms that provide views of the garden's major features. Active educational exercises

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Fountains and the Chisholm Trail Mural at Sundance Square; kayaking the Trinity River; and bicycling past the Mark Twain sculpture on the Trinity Trails.

entertain along the way, like walking on balance beam logs, using spotting scopes, and crawling through hollow tree replicas.

Back astride another bicycle, I continue on my way, stopping to refill my water bottle at one of the fountains dotting the route. Several times, I pause to watch people trying their luck at one of the trail's fishing areas. Matt Oliver, public information officer with the Trinity River Vision Authority, informs me that people catch yellow and blue catfish, crappie, and largemouth and black bass. (The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department releases fish periodically to improve anglers' chances.)

The afternoon almost gone, I swing into downtown on Taylor Street, return my bike—more than a dozen stations in the downtown area and 44 in all make it easy—and pop into my lodging for the weekend, the Courtyard by Marriott, to clean up. Then it's a short walk to Panther Island Pavilion, a beach and waterfront stage on the Trinity that hosts a variety of events year-round. During the summer Rockin' the River concert series,

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September 17
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October 15
Fall Fest

October 22
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December 3
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live bands play to a crowd lounging in tubes on the river. I'm here for Oktoberfest Fort Worth (September 22-24, 2016), a line-up of live music, traditional German beer and cuisine like schnitzel and strudel, keg rolling, stein hoisting, and a dachshund parade.

All this fun has me ready for a good night's sleep. My hotel, originally called the Blackstone Hotel, opened in 1929 and hosted famous guests including Richard Nixon and, according to rumor, Clark Gable. Restored in the late 1990s, the hotel became a Courtyard by Marriott. Most of the original interior is gone, but a small set of original terrazzo steps remains in the lobby—nicknamed “the steps to nowhere.” And the exterior retains its historic Art Deco look—23 stories of bricks and windows with original spires and terraces. Best of all, the hotel is in the heart of downtown and only about 10 blocks from the Trinity Trails.

Next morning, I hop on another Bicycle and pedal a little more than a mile to the West 7th District, a trendy, pedestrian-friendly area covering nearly five blocks. I meet a friend for breakfast at Righteous Foods. Formerly Lanny's Alta Cocina, this brainchild of Chef Lanny Lancarte serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner crafted from locally sourced ingredients. My “slow coffee” tastes rich and smooth, and I devour the Ranchero Green Eggs and Ham—organic eggs, corn tortillas, pork shoulder, tomatillo, and queso fresco—along with a side of crisp, flavorful uncured bacon.

After lingering over another cup of coffee, I ride back to Panther Island Pavilion to rent a kayak from Backwoods Paddlesports, which offers single and tandem kayaks, canoes, and paddleboards. I paddle upstream on the West Fork for about an hour, checking out birds and turtles before turning my boat around and encountering beautiful, photo-worthy views of the Fort Worth skyline.

I turn in the kayak and pedal to downtown's Sundance Square Plaza,

a recently renovated outdoor space that serves as the centerpiece for a 35-square-block entertainment and business district. A Chisholm Trail-themed mural covers a two-story wall, giant umbrellas shade outdoor tables and benches, and 216 individual fountains spray from the ground, prompting more than a few kids to soak their clothes. At Bird Café, located in the 1889 Land Block Title Building on the corner of the square, I admire the walls and their watercolors of birds painted by Fort Worth artists Scott and Stuart Gentling. The café's lunch menu carries tantalizing salads, lunch plates, and a selection of sandwiches. I opt for smoked chicken salad on a croissant, and I'm delighted to find watermelon and goat cheese in my side salad.

Next, I spend the afternoon exploring other parts of the Trinity Trails by bicycle, riding up to the famous Fort Worth Stockyards, northwest of downtown, then pedaling east along the West Fork. Back downtown, I descend into the Fort Worth Water Gardens, several city blocks of various water features, from a still pool to fountains and, my favorite, the Active Pool, a series of steps and terraces that descends four stories from street level, covered in cascading water.

As I make my way back toward my hotel for the night, I stop along Main Street for dinner at Grace, a posh eatery set in a refined yet comfortable space, which takes a sophisticated spin on classic American cuisine. Then—why not?—I splurge on dessert with the chocolate-and-hazelnut tart, with candied huckleberries, marshmallows, and chocolate mousse and ice cream. It seems a fitting conclusion to my active Fort Worth weekend. I've earned it. 🍷



TRINITY TRAILS

For information, including maps, check out the online forum www.trinitytrails.org and the Tarrant Regional Water District, www.trwd.com/fort-worth-trinity-trails-map.

HIT THE ROAD

CAN'T-MISS GETAWAYS



➤ DESTINATION: STARR COUNTY ◀

The Early Bird's Reward

Natural wonders and border culture in Starr County

text by **Daniel Blue Tyx**

WHEN NATURE ENTHUSIASTS THINK OF the Rio Grande Valley, they most often picture the glimmering resacas and moss-hung forests of destinations like the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. But venturing farther upriver, away from the large cities and the tropical influence of the Gulf Coast, one finds a strikingly different landscape of rolling ranchland, sheer bluffs, and Old West frontier towns. Not long ago, my wife, Laura, and I headed west from our home in McAllen to explore the natural offerings of Starr County. We hoped to find not only scenic vistas of starkly beautiful country but also bird and plant species that can't be found anywhere else in the United States.



- **Brownsville**
2 hours
- **San Antonio**
4 hours
- **Houston**
6 hours
- **Abilene**
8 hours

As a high school science teacher, Laura was especially looking forward to the first stop on our itinerary, Rancho Lomitas Native Plant Nursery, a 260-acre nursery and nature preserve whose owner, Benito Treviño, is a pioneer in the field of ethnobotany—the study of how humans use plants for food, medicine, and rituals. First, though, we had to get there. The ranch is 10 miles north of Rio Grande City, and no street signs marked our path through winding gravel roads. Luckily, Benito had given us superb directions, but even so, our arrival at the wrought-iron gate—just where he'd said it would be—felt like a small miracle.

The instant we stepped out of the car, a symphony of birdsong filled the air, and we knew the drive was

HIT THE ROAD



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Birding at Salineño Preserve; pan dulce at La Reynera Bakery; a green jay at Salineño Preserve; Casa de Adobe in Rio Grande City; Benito Treviño of Rancho Lomitas Native Plant Nursery; the distance from Rio Grande City to Roma.

worth it. A brilliantly colored scarlet tanager sang in a mesquite branch, while a flock of rare scaled quails scurried in the underbrush, their namesake “scales” glittering like chainmail. Closer to the main house, in a nectar-rich garden shaded by Texas ebonies, we found magnificent green jays feasting on oranges along with the black-headed Audubon’s oriole, another of the uncommon birds that calls the ranch home.

We caught up with Benito, instantly recognizable by his thick mustache and the bag of seeds in his hand, in his plant nursery. Twenty years ago, he started Rancho Lomitas as part of an effort to reforest some of the Valley’s

native habitat, 95 percent of which has been lost to agriculture and development. The bag he was holding, he explained, contained seeds of the Walker’s Manioc plant, a threatened South Texas native with a fleur-de-lis-shaped leaf. Now, he was planting the seeds in his nursery in the hopes of someday restoring the population in the wild. Nearby, he showed us an endangered Star Cactus. The name comes from its yellow flower, but coincidentally Starr County is the only place in the United States you can find it. “These are my babies,” he told us.

When Benito was a child growing up in Starr County, his father and grandfather passed along botanical traditions that date back to cattle-driving vaqueros and indigenous Coahuiltecan hunter-gatherers. “Much of that knowledge is being lost, or already has been,” he said. On an impromptu tour of the ranch, we discovered edible and medicinal plants around every corner,

including the strawberry cactus, whose fruits actually taste like strawberries. Benito also showed us a Spanish dagger yucca plant with a stalk that can be grilled like asparagus, leaves that can be woven into hammocks, and roots that can be turned into soap. “With that plant,” he explained, “you can have your breakfast in the morning, a place to rest in the afternoon, and your bath at night.”

Rancho Lomitas is also home to four furnished vacation rentals, an RV park, and campsites, but we had already made lodging reservations in Rio Grande City, so as the sun sank low in the sky, we said goodbye to Benito and drove to La Borde House, our hotel in the heart of historic downtown. One of the oldest cities in the Valley, Rio Grande City was originally part of a Spanish land grant in 1767. By the time the hotel was built in 1899, the city was a bustling port for steamboats that navigated the Rio Grande bound for

New Orleans. Today, the Starr County Historical Foundation runs the hotel, which has themed rooms decorated with authentic period furniture. When we arrived at the Audubon Room and saw the fireplace adorned with tiles painted with the likenesses of green jays, we knew we’d made the right selection for the night.

But first there was the matter of food. We strolled to Casa de Adobe, a steakhouse and bar whose main dining room is in a historic home that really is built of mud and straw. We admired the original mesquite woodwork inlaid with turquoise and ordered a meal fit for two hungry vaqueros after a day on the trail—the *parrillada*, a sizzling assortment of beef and chicken fajita, sausage, and grilled vegetables, served in a cast-iron skillet with homemade tortillas.

The next morning, we woke up before dawn, knowing that the early bird gets the—well, the birds. We swung by La Reynera Bakery for coffee and fresh *pan dulce*, and headed out in the direction of the Salineño Preserve, a famed site in birding circles. Along the way, we stopped at the Roma Bluffs World Birding Center—part of a network of nine different Valley birding sites collaboratively run by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and local communities. The center offers exhibits on the area’s natural and cultural history, as well as a dramatic vista from a bluff overlooking the winding Rio Grande. The volunteers at the center also gave us a hand-drawn map to Salineño, located 25 miles west of Rio Grande City, for which we were most grateful. Although I’d been once before, I knew that part of its appeal lay in its location off the beaten track.

We arrived at a parking area in sight of the river and walked a well-marked path through the mesquite for a few dozen yards. Then, we turned a corner, and Laura audibly gasped. It was her first visit, and though I’d tried my best to describe this place, words couldn’t convey the kaleidoscope of color and motion before us. We saw dozens and

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dozens of orioles, green jays, cardinals, kiskadees, and woodpeckers—along with many other species—flitting from branch to branch, some so close we could have touched them.

In the early 1980s, caretakers Lois Hughes and Merle Ihne explained, visiting RVers began feeding the birds here with a homemade mixture of peanut butter, cornmeal, and lard. Later, owners Gale and Pat DeWind gifted the property to the Valley Land Fund, a nonprofit that partners with the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge to protect the land for birds and people alike. "Generation after generation of birds have known that when their natural food source dwindles in the wintertime, they can come here to help tide them over until the spring comes," Lois explained. All this attention, coupled with the spot's idyllic location at a bend in the river, has meant more species of birds in one place than I've ever seen, anywhere.

A birding tour group arrived amid a rapid flutter of photo lenses, the expert birders no less amazed by the winged spectacle than we were. Joining us in a line of white plastic chairs in the shade of Lois and Merle's RV, the tour leader happily reported sightings of white-collared seedeaters and red-billed pigeons down at the river's edge. After another half-hour of birding and chatting, Laura and I added our names to the thousands already in the guest book and followed in the footsteps of the tour group down to the water's edge. Watching the river gently glide past, we were content with a sighting of a great blue heron and the greatest discovery of our weekend getaway: a tranquil moment together. 🌿

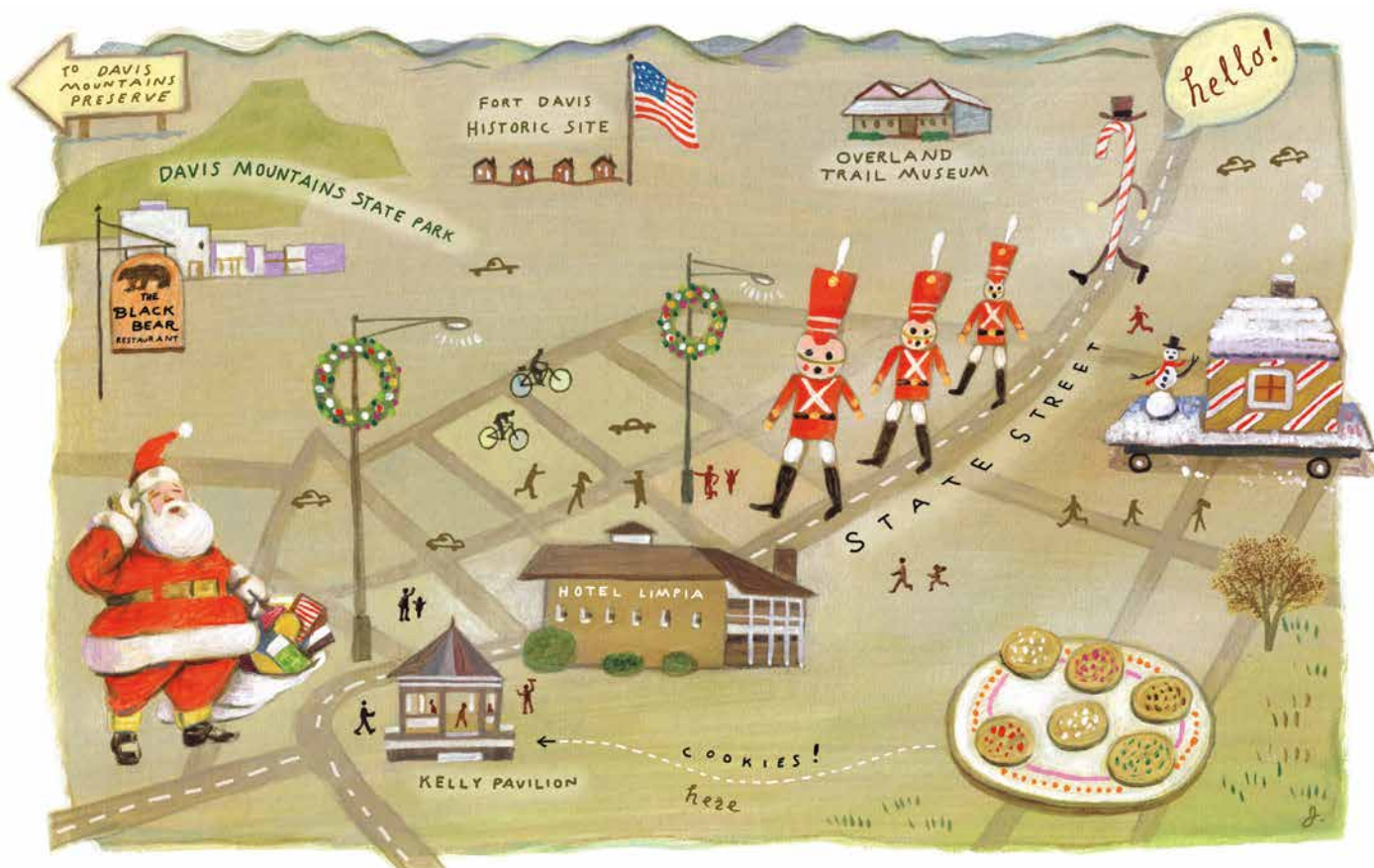


STARR COUNTY BIRDING

For more on Starr County birding, check out Rancho Lomitas at www.rancholomitas.com, Roma Bluffs World Birding Center at www.the.worldbirdingcenter.com, and Salineño Preserve at [956/784-7575](tel:9567847575).

HIT THE ROAD

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DESTINATION: **FORT DAVIS**



Festive Frontier

Unplug at Fort Davis' Frontier Christmas Festival

text by **E. Dan Klepper**

DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON, THE FRESH air and cheerful sunlit peaks of Fort Davis become all the more festive thanks to the town's Frontier Christmas Festival. This mile-high community in the foothills of the Davis Mountains commemorates its Old West history, scenic mountain setting, and the delicious tradition of homemade cookies with the annual holiday celebration, scheduled for Saturday, December 10, this year.

Developed around a frontier military garrison in the mid-1800s, Fort Davis grew into a prominent West Texas outpost because of its location at the crossroads of two major trails. Today, Trans-Pecos residents and visitors alike converge on the town during the Frontier Christmas Festival for activities like the Holiday Lighting Contest, a cookie-baking



- **Odessa**
2.5 hours
- **El Paso**
3 hours
- **San Antonio**
6 hours
- **Dallas**
8 hours

championship, special hiking opportunities, the Overland Trail Museum's Holiday Open House, and the Frontier Christmas Parade.

Start your Frontier Christmas early and share breakfast with Santa Claus at Davis Mountains State Park's Black Bear Restaurant. The Black Bear is located at the park's Indian Lodge, a multi-storied hotel designed to resemble a pueblo village and built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The lodge "decks the halls" for the holidays, adding tinsel, baubles, and wreaths to the hand-made adobe walls, rock fireplaces, and hand-carved furnishings. The festive decor complements the handsome views of the surrounding pine forest and mountain landscape, where during the festival hikers can indulge in cookies

at different stations around the park. Meet and greet Santa at the Black Bear and then join the kids for a special Christmas-cookie decorating workshop in the restaurant.

Fort Davis wasn't always as family-friendly as it is today. In fact, had you attempted a real "frontier" Christmas in the 19th Century, you probably would have experienced more "naughty" than "nice." In 1854, the U.S. military established the garrison that preceded the town, part of a line of defense along the far West Texas frontier, on the site of a Native American village known to early Texans as Painted Comanche Camp. The appropriation of the site created plenty of animosity among the surrounding tribes, and by 1867 the

garrison had been looted by Apaches and abandoned.

The town of Fort Davis, a rowdy settlement originally called Chihuahua, evolved just southwest of the military operation and survived long enough for the 9th U.S. Cavalry to arrive in 1867 and reoccupy the fort. The military presence brought a limited calm throughout the region, although fights and heavy drinking (courtesy of the soldier population) made for a ram-bunctious blend of part-timers and permanent locals. Fort Davis National Historic Site, modestly decorated for the holiday season, preserves the old fort, considered one of the Southwest's best surviving examples of an Indian Wars-era military post.

Despite its frontier turbulence, Fort Davis was among the most important communities in the Trans-Pecos. The Overland Trail Museum, which explores the town's history, welcomes visitors during the Frontier Christmas Festival with warm punch, cookies, and Christmas ornaments and decorations, such as vintage handmade dolls dressed for the holiday season. Fort Davis is located along the Southern Overland Trail, the route used by the Butterfield Overland Mail Company (and later Wells Fargo) to transport mail and passengers across the country in the 1860s. Also part of the San Antonio-El Paso Road, the trail was eventually made obsolete with the 1883 arrival of the railroad in nearby Marfa. Inside the museum, antique medical supplies, kitchen utensils, a hair-curling machine, an original telephone switchboard, and dozens of early photographs reveal the stark realities of life on the Fort Davis frontier.

If you want to experience a sense of the early frontier days in Fort Davis, albeit in comfort, be sure to reserve a room at the Hotel Limpia, one of multiple lodgings in town. The Victorian, pink-stone hotel was built in 1912 as a summer retreat for Texas cattlemen. The rooms reflect the era, with high ceilings and vintage furnishings, and the communal sitting room next to the lobby features antique overstuffed

armchairs and a fireplace. During the holidays, garlands and gold ribbons grace the Limpia throughout. Generous wrap-around porches offer both enclosed and open-air locations to read a book, play a board game, write a last-minute letter to Santa, or do nothing more than relax and rock in one of the hotel's wooden rockers.

Hotel Limpia also offers a chance to catch up on Christmas shopping at its Javelinas & Hollyhocks store, which carries gifts like jams, jellies, books, and decorative oddities from Texas and around the world. Shopping is a key part of the Frontier Christmas Festival as multiple shops around town display their Texas mountain crafts; the Chamber of Commerce provides maps to the various retailers. Earn some extra points with Santa by shopping at Fort Davis' Grand Companions Thrift Store, a fundraising venture of the Grand Companions Humane Society, the town's no-kill animal shelter.

If you're looking to gather the extended family or a big group for a holiday getaway, consider the 1898 Webster House. Located within walking distance of downtown, the Webster House, with four bedrooms and two bathrooms, combines a frontier Texas experience with updated modern conveniences like high-speed wireless internet, a full-size kitchen, and satellite television. The house includes classic turn-of-the-century highlights like tall ceilings, transoms, original wood floors, a fireplace, and period furnishings including cushy, four-poster beds.

Frontier Christmas specializes in cookies (they are available just about everywhere you go in town) and honors the homemade holiday fare with a cookie-baking contest. Judging takes place at the Kelly Outdoor Pavilion behind the Fort Davis Chamber of Commerce office. Local judges are on hand to nibble and take notes. Winners get a trophy featuring a cheerful gold-colored Santa.

Along State Street, Fort Davis' main



CLOCKWISE:
A wreath-framed view from Indian Lodge at Davis Mountains State Park; Christmas-cookie decorating at Black Bear Restaurant; Javelinas & Hollyhocks; ponderosa pines at the Nature Conservancy's Davis Mountains Preserve.

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FORT DAVIS FRONTIER CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL is Saturday, December 10, with events at various locations around town and a lighted parade on State Street at 6 p.m. For festival information, call the Fort Davis Chamber of Commerce at **800/524-3015**; www.fortdavis.com.

avenue, cowboys gather on horseback alongside parade floats, decorated by hand and strung with lights, for the annual Frontier Christmas parade at about 6 p.m. Local school clubs, civic organizations, and the volunteer fire department embellish trucks and flatbed trailers with Christmas cheer. After the parade, Santa arrives for photos and to take gift requests at the Jeff Davis County Library, located in a charming turn-of-the-century mercantile building.

Perhaps the best way to experience frontier life would be to unplug completely and take a hike through the Davis Mountains. As part of the Frontier Christmas Festival, The Nature Conservancy will open its Davis Mountains Preserve to the public for the entire weekend (December 9-11) for hiking and camping. Located 25 miles northwest of town, the preserve's McIvor Conservation Center is decorated for the holidays and even hosts a visit from Santa. (High clearance vehicles are required for visitors driving beyond the center.)

A "sky island" with rare plants and animals, the preserve helps protect the last surviving population of ponderosa pine trees in Texas as well as stands of quaking aspen and madrone trees. Here you can explore some of the highest elevations in the Davis Mountains, including Baldy Peak, a massive rock knob crowning Mount Livermore with unparalleled views of the surrounding mountain range. Be prepared. It could take most of the day to get there and back, but who knows, once on top you might catch a glimpse of Santa on his way! 🎅



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