



*Desert dreaming:*

# COLOUR & CULTURE DEFY BORDERS IN EL PASO

BY **CORRINA ALLEN KIERSONS**



The Wyler Aerial Tramway at Franklin Mountains State Park

**T**HE CLOSER YOU GET TO any line meant to distinguish one place from another, the blurrier that line becomes. That's how it felt to arrive in El Paso, where I was greeted at the airport with Texan hospitality and a classic Mexican margarita featuring just the right amount of tequila for two o'clock in the afternoon. Over the next few days, I'd learn that some things are too powerful, too beautiful and too important to be contained by geopolitics – a heartening lesson, courtesy of this small West Texas town.

Separated by nothing more – and nothing less – than a line inked across a map at the end of the Mexican-American war, El Paso maintains close ties with its south-of-the-border Chihuahuan sister city, Juárez. One of busiest border crossings on the continent divides them, but El Pasoans think of the people on the Mexican side of the bridge as a natural part of their community.

El Paso isn't Blue or Red, but a more complicated shade of purple. Living along the border makes the people here experts on the situation between Mexico and the U.S.; everyone from the city's First Lady to the Uber driver who said that a Trump-mandated barrier between El Paso and Juárez would hurt people on the American side more – and not just economically. ▶



Clockwise: El Paso Street, Rock climbing at Heuco Tanks, Southwest University Park

Approximately 22,000 Mexican citizens cross over into the West Texas city every day – for work, for school, to shop and dine, and to cheer on the local minor league baseball team, the El Paso Chihuahuas. It’s that cross-border ebb and flow that’s responsible for the city’s diverse cultural heritage and a vibrancy that’s obvious to everyone who visits.

As the second largest state in the U.S., one part of Texas can feel worlds away from another. In Dallas, dozens of swimming pools dot flat, green backyards in the suburbs that ring the city centre, a cluster of glass towers concealed in mist. But move on to El Paso, and a completely different side of Texas reveals itself.

Here, at its westernmost point, the state morphs into a cactus-and-palm-tree-spotted desert that stretches out towards the Franklin Mountains (which can be thought of as either the beginning or the end of the Rockies). Flat-top Adobe buildings come in colours like lemon yellow, aquamarine and carnation pink.

For my first dinner in Texas, I travelled southeast along the highway that eventually leads to Marfa. I was headed for a ranch about 40 minutes outside El Paso where, back in 1982, Jack Nicholson and Harvey Keitel filmed *The Border*. As I got further and further away from the city, the desert asserted itself as a place ruled by the elements alone. Looking out into the wide open spaces at the city’s edges made borders, as a concept, seem unfathomable.

El Paso has many of the characteristics of a typical American city: billboards advertise burger joints and the services of personal injury lawyers, and big box stores line the freeways the same way they do in Michigan or Florida. But this is a city that hasn’t allowed itself to be divided the way much of the country has – and that on its own makes it unique.

As soon as I’d dropped my bags, I headed to Segundo, the historically Hispanic neighbourhood known for its painted public murals. From ‘La Virgen De Guadalupe’ on Ochoa Street

to ‘Entelequia’ on Florence, each work radiates a Mexican influence. At the El Paso Museum of Art (admission: free, air conditioning: sublime) Cheech Marin’s collection of Chicano paintings were on display, more evidence of the cultural crossover.

And during a visit to the Italian-founded Lucchese boot factory, I met Hispanic artisans hand-crafting Texan cowboy boots that were themselves works of art. Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry was born in El Paso, Stevie Nicks spent her pre-teen years here, Tom Lea captured the desert landscapes of his hometown on canvas, and Cormac McCarthy came here to write his epic anti-Western, *Blood Meridian*. It’s easy to see how life in this multicultural border town could serve as a well of inspiration for artists of every stripe.

The city’s culinary scene is just as culturally intertwined. El Pasoans like sweet wines and spicy food, steak and margaritas are on almost every menu,

and their barbecue holds its own against any city in the South. Brisket, sausage, turkey legs and ribs are all served with tangy sauce, baked beans, and at Cattleman's Steakhouse, a restaurant and working ranch just outside the city limits, they make a perfect coleslaw with chunks of pineapple. But it's in the restaurants where El Pasoan Tex meets Chihuahuan Mex that the city's chefs make an indelible mark: with offerings like chile relleno burritos and a kind of stacked enchilada – dishes known as "border food."

When night fell on my first day in Texas, I found myself back at the hotel, gazing out over a city shaped by lights. A local pointed out a subtle divide: on one side of an impossibly fine line, the lights shon yellow-orange; on the other, they gave off a slight greenish glow. Nestled right up against the orange bulbs of El Paso, green ones emanated from Juárez. Unless you knew to look for it, the difference was invisible. ✪



Cheese enchiladas

## When You Go

**WHAT TO DO:** Catch an **El Paso Chihuahuas** minor league baseball game. The San Diego Padres farm team's stadium is state of the art. A two-level open-air park incorporates the city's beautiful old clock tower at its centre and great seats can be had for as little as four bucks. Not a sports fan? Go for the ballpark snacks: dog bowl steak nachos, fiery Cheetos with queso, and a Michelada to outdo all other beer-based cocktails. An early morning stop at **Franklin Mountains State Park** is

also a must: the sun coming up over the mountains is rivalled only by the sunsets that turn the city a half-dozen shades of pink each night.

**WHERE TO DINE:** Fans of Mexican food will find no shortage of places to eat, including **Segundo Barrio's Jalisco Cafe**, **Los Bandidos De Carlos & Mickey's** (get the prickly pear margarita), **L&J Cafe**, and the legendary **H&H Car Wash** where you can get your truck scrubbed while you refuel with huevos rancheros, chile relleno or cheese enchiladas.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Coming with family? Check into the **Doubletree Downtown Hilton** and be greeted with a fresh chocolate chip cookie and get access to the hotel's rooftop pool which boasts views of **Southwest University Park**, home of the Chihuahuas. For a cool couples weekend, book a room in mid-century modern heaven at **Hotel Indigo** (which also has a rooftop pool – this is hot, hot El Paso, after all).

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