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THE MOST TEXAS PART OF TEXAS

By Terri Peterson Smith



Are you game to try the 72-ounce steak at the Big Texan Steak Ranch?

In the Texas Panhandle, rugged terrain of surprising beauty is steeped in history and comes with a wagonload of quirky fun.

As the sun rises over Palo Duro Canyon near Amarillo, Texas, a gentle breeze whispers through the mesquite. Stop and listen. You can almost hear the sound of Comanche ghost horses running in the canyon.

The winds of history still blow—not just in this canyon, but through all aspects of life in the Texas Panhandle. Maybe it's the longhorn cattle trotting down Polk Street in Amarillo before the rodeo. Perhaps it's the rickety old windmills pumping water for cattle. Or it could be the dry, rugged terrain that makes Amarillo seem like the perfect setting for an old John Wayne movie. There's no doubt that anyone searching for a true taste of old Texas will find it here among modern-day cowgirls and cowboys whose roots and ranches go back to the mid 1800s and the first cattle drives.

The Grand Canyon of Texas

The historic and, for many, spiritual heart of the area is Palo Duro Canyon, gouged into the flat plains about 20 miles from Amarillo. It's the second-largest canyon in the United States, but, hey, second isn't too bad when it includes spectacular scenery; hiking, biking and horse trails; zip lines; historic ranches; and a giant musical appropriately named *Texas* that is performed against the backdrop of the canyon every summer.

Palo Duro Canyon State Park contains 29,182 scenic acres at the northern end of the 120-mile-long canyon. Park Interpreter Jeff Davis says that for visitors arriving from the brown flatlands, the 800-foot plunge of the colorful canyon comes as a shock. "They're amazed at this huge chasm opening up so suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere," he says.

Artist Georgia O'Keeffe called Palo Duro "a burning, seething cauldron, filled with drama, light and color."



Top: Phyllis Nickum shares the history of the Comanche on her horseback tours that tell the story of the Panhandle region.

Bottom: All types of wildlife can be found hanging out in the Amarillo area.



To avoid a literal “burning, seething” experience, Davis advises hikers to pack plenty of water and hit the trail early when the arid air is coolest. The six-mile round-trip trail to the park’s iconic rock formation, The Lighthouse, is unbeatable, and just about anywhere in the park you’ll encounter wildlife ranging from deer, aoudad sheep, lizards, bobcats, and

coyotes to birds such as roadrunners and Rio Grande turkeys.

Telling the stories

You might also come across the park’s resident longhorn cattle, T-Bone, Brisket and Omelette (members of the state’s longhorn herd), or a dugout shelter that early ranchers used. If so, you’ve walked into a

major piece of history. In 1874, the tension between white settlers and the native Comanche played out in the brutal Battle of Palo Duro Canyon. The army destroyed the Comanches’ supplies, slaughtered their horses and eventually sent them to reservations in Oklahoma, a story told in S.C. Gwynne’s bestseller, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History*.

Then, in 1876, Charles Goodnight (the inspiration for the Woodrow Call character in Larry McMurtry’s classic novel *Lonesome Dove*) opened the famous JA Ranch in the canyon. At its peak, the ranch supported more than 100,000 head of cattle on 1.5 million acres, and it remains a working ranch today. The park, originally part of that ranch, opened in 1934.

To get a better understanding of Panhandle history, mosey about 12 miles down the road from Palo Duro Canyon State Park to the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum in the town of Canyon. It’s Texas’s oldest and largest history museum, and it lies on the campus of West Texas A&M University. Its vast collection includes dinosaur skeletons, pioneer life exhibits, memorabilia of the great Comanche Chief Quanah Parker, oil derricks, antique cars and western art, including works by Georgia O’Keeffe.

Still, to experience the heritage and spirit of Panhandle life, you’ll want to get out of the museum and into the saddle. There’s no better way to do that than to ride with “Cowgirls and Cowboys in the West,” a tour that takes place at Los Cedros Ranch. Owner Phyllis Nickum and her crew

Amarillo and its surrounds have a great balance of quirk, kitsch and spectacular scenery.

Top: the colorful buildings of Amarillo;
bottom left: The Lighthouse rock formation
in Palo Duro Canyon State Park; bottom right:
Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum



welcome visitors from around the world to this working ranch on the edge of the canyon.

Out on her posse-style trail rides (no boring nose-to-tail here) through the dry mesquite and juniper, Nickum lets her company know that they are riding through the sacred home of the Comanche, the most powerful Indian tribe and the greatest horsemen in American history.

“History books are written by the victors, so I do my part to infuse the majesty of the tribe in the story,” she says. She also calls attention to the strength and endurance of the women of western history—women like Molly Goodnight and Stagecoach Mary, who

are often overlooked in the story of the west.

A celebration of the road

Hop off your horse and cruise into Amarillo to savor a completely different Panhandle era: the glory days of Route 66. Amarillo, the largest Texas city on the route, commemorates its place on the “Mother Road” with a Texas-sized dose of quirk and kitsch. The Route 66 Historic District on Sixth Avenue features a mile of art galleries, shops, restaurants, and bars in historic buildings. For example, the NAT Ballroom, once a big-band dance hall, now houses more than 100 vendors of antiques, collectibles and artisan goods.

The giant bull-topped Big Texan Steak Ranch relocated from its original Route 66 home to its current sprawling spot on I-40, but it retains every bit of its outsized personality. Most big Texan diners opt for a filet or strip, but truly ambitious carnivores tackle the 72-ounce steak. Eat it in one hour or less and your meal is free. Wash it down with a Whoop Your Donkey Double IPA and a side of mountain oysters while country fiddlers serenade your table.

RVers and van lifers won’t want to miss the very fun—and free!—RV Museum located inside the Jack Sisemore Traveland RV dealership. RVs and campers in the collection date back to the 1930s, and include the world’s oldest Airstream and a rig that Robin Williams



Cadillac Ranch is an homage to the American Dream.

drove in the 2006 movie *RV*. Finally, in a wide-open field near downtown, you'll spot a true touch of Texas crazy, and one of the country's most photographed roadside attractions, Cadillac Ranch. The public art installation consists of 10 Cadillacs buried in the ground, fins up. Local oil and broadcasting tycoon and all-round eccentric Stanley Marsh 3 (he thought Roman numerals were pretentious) commissioned this monument to the American Dream in 1974. Cadillac Ranch was memorialized in the Bruce Springsteen song of the same name, and in the movie *Cars*.


Modern life

You'll find plenty that's new in Amarillo, too, including breweries, a

jazz club, cool coffee shops, and some trendy restaurants and hotels. A Minor League Baseball park with a Double-A Texas League team will open in time for the 2019 season.

Yet, for folks in the Panhandle, tradition remains tightly interwoven with modern life. You'll see it at the 100-year-old Oliver Saddle Shop, where they still handcraft boots, leather chaps, saddles and gloves that are serious work equipment for ranch hands.

Those ranch hands regularly display their skills in a series of lively ranch rodeos that culminates with the World Championships in November. You'll see bronc riding, wild-cow milking, stray gathering and team penning.

Not to be missed: the mutton busting competition in which tiny kids cling on for a sheep ride. Cowgirls and cowboys in training, they're as wild and tough as the juniper in the canyon. They learn early here. 

Terri Peterson Smith is a freelance writer, photographer and road tripper based in Minneapolis. She specializes in travel and food writing, and has published a book on literary travel, *Off The Beaten Page: The Best Trips for Lit Lovers, Book Clubs and Girls on Getaways*. Find her on Instagram: @terripetersonsmith, or at her website: terripetersonsmith.com.