



DESTINATION

Round the Big Bend

The twists and white-knuckle turns of this sprawling national park in southern Texas are best enjoyed on two wheels, finds **Cameron Dueck**.

A hot, dry wind is whistling through my helmet. My motorcycle hurtles towards a sharp, downhill curve. I downshift, brake and lean into the turn. As I twist the throttle and roar out, the red rock canyon walls flash by in a dizzying blur.

Ahead of me, as far as the eye can see, are curves. Dipping, sharp, suddenly dropping into gullies. Above me are vultures, with huge black wings and crimson heads, wheeling and soaring in the clear blue sky. If I miss one of the curves, or the heat gets the better of me, they will swoop and pick my bones clean before help can arrive.

Big Bend National Park, in the southwest of the American state of Texas, lives up to its name. Few places beat it if you're looking for lonely roads that wind through stark, beautiful scenery. The roads are mostly two lane, with plenty of gravel side routes to explore if you're on a dual sport bike.

The park – which hugs the Mexican border – is an easy ride from cities such as Houston, Austin and Tucson. With 3,242 square kilometres of parkland to explore, you'll wear out your tyres before you see it all. But this is no place for sissies. The spines and thorns of cacti are sharp enough to puncture tyres. The fast flowing Rio Grande, which runs for 190 kilometres along the southern border of the park and includes the canyons of Santa Elena,

Mariscal and Boquillas, claims the lives of several waders a year. Four species of rattlesnake and one type of cobra live in these sandy hills, along with tarantulas and scorpions.

The nearest hospital is 160 kilometres away, and no public transport passes through the park. Water and fuel supplies are few and far between, and Big Bend is surrounded by other protected areas – for example, to the west is Big Bend Ranch State Park and across the Mexican border is the Parque Nacional Maderas del Carmen – further enhancing its remoteness and the richness of its wildlife.

It is these qualities that can provide the ride of a lifetime. The maximum speed limit in the park is 45m/h (72km/h). I would never recommend breaking the law for the pure joy of riding, but the roads are empty and the temptation is great ...

Slow down, however, and you will be rewarded. The park is home to more than 450 bird species, including golden eagles with eight-foot wingspans. The eagles are rare; 2,500 of them were shot, trapped or poisoned in the 12 years before the park was formed because ranchers considered them pests.

Big Bend is the eighth-largest national park in the lower 48 states of the US and boasts more species of bird, bat and cactus than any other. It marks the northernmost range of many plants and animals. Deer are plentiful, as are

wily coyotes and roadrunner birds – which don't exist only in Looney Tunes cartoons, as I'd assumed.

Tribes passed through these hills for thousands of years, leaving behind pictographs and other archaeological treasures. Archaeologists have discovered artefacts here estimated to be 9,000 years old. The Rio Grande has been a border area for centuries, with Texas having been claimed by at least six nations. The Spanish crossed the Rio Grande in the 16th and 17th centuries, searching for gold, silver and fertile land. Comanche Indians crossed it in the 19th century, travelling to and from Mexico in raiding parties. Today you can ride your motorcycle where braves once rode horses, along the Comanche Trail.

The mountains themselves are a thing of beauty, and are far easier to spot while astride a careening motorcycle than camouflaged wildlife. Eroded into towering monuments and grotesque shapes, their colour changes from red to grey to blue and yellow, depending on the angle of the sun. Lost Mine Peak is the highest, rising to some 2,300 metres.

Sometimes the mountains are a breathtaking backdrop, a distant target to aim your bike towards. Other times they leap onto the road, forcing the tarmac into back-bending curves and climbs that leave you with a queasy feeling in the pit of your stomach.