



Clockwise from far left: a long and winding road in the Big Bend National Park, Texas; the Rio Grande flows through Boquillas Canyon; riders are not short of scenic distractions; the Chisos mountains; a climber tackles volcanic rock below Burro Mesa.

Getting there: Many airlines operate flights from Hong Kong to US airports that have connections to Houston and Austin, in Texas. The nearest Amtrak railway station that caters to Big Bend National Park is located in Alpine, Texas. EagleRider, in Houston (www.eaglerider.com/houston), is one of a number of companies in the area that rent out motorcycles.

The approach into Big Bend from Houston is a dramatic entrance into the mountain ranges. A flat, straight country road suddenly gives way to a stretch that cuts through a small hill before throwing the new arrival onto the mountains' mercy. I go from riding with my feet up on highway pegs to gripping my brakes to negotiate curves drawn by the devil.

Chisos Mountains Lodge is hidden at the top of a narrow, tightly winding road. It is here that I see my first deer. It delicately steps aside as I drive by, apparently unafraid of a screaming beast in black.

The lodge offers the only accommodation in the park – ranging from comfortable, simple motel rooms to spacious cabins – and views from the alfresco dining area sweep over Burro Mesa (a *mesa* is a flat-topped hill). Other overnight options include economical hotels in the

small towns of Lajitas, Terlingua and Study Butte, all to the west of the park and there are numerous camping grounds in and around Big Bend.

For visitors planning to stop for a while, the park offers excellent hiking, birding and river rafting. Many of the trails in the High Chisos were established to move livestock in and out of the mountains prior to the establishment of the park.

Several of the hamlets to the west are described as “ghost towns” but, although there are a smattering of derelict, abandoned farms and buildings in evidence, they are home to enough residents offering cold drinks and tourist trinkets to keep the spirits at bay. A rest stop just outside Terlingua is home to a mock-up of a square-rigger ship and a submarine conning tower

– clearly the heat has gone to some of these desert heads.

On the western side of the park are small, evenly spaced hills that give your front wheel a lift with each crest. At the bottom of each is a sandy, rough river fjord – these are just as dangerous dry as they are with a foot of water in the bottom.

The roads are empty. Whenever I see another vehicle, I'm startled and catch myself touching the brakes. Approaching cars appear to dance and waver a metre above the highway, floating in the hot desert air. I stop to take in the view, and I hear only the hoarse rasp of wind-blown sand and the ticking of my hot engine block.

I notice a black vulture circling above me, swooping a bit lower to see if dinner has been served.

Not today, my friend.