

Dining in the Desert

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Dining in the Desert by Rona Distenfeld



It's nine in the morning. The air is cool, but with the promise of a warm Fall day as the sun fills the blue skies overhead. We stand near the banks of the Rio Grande, tamarisk and cottonwoods mixing with the cholla and prickly pear around us, and gaze at Mexico across the river.

As we approach the Rock Slide, the lone technical rapid on this stretch of river, our guides make a plan. We land just above the rapid so they can climb up and reconnoiter. This is not a fast water rapid; the challenge here is picking the best path and hitting it just right so that the raft won't get stuck between the huge boulders.

After some discussion the path is chosen and the rafts head out one at a time. We all watch those who go ahead, cheering them on, and when it's our turn we find the other rafts waiting for us just downstream of the Rock Slide, their crews applauding as we pull alongside to watch the final rafts make it through. Even though the guides have done all the work, we all share the sense of triumph once everyone is through.

The float continues, the canyon walls rising even higher. We stop for lunch on a beach by Fern Canyon, and after lunch a group of us hikes part way into this special spot on the Mexican side of the river. A tinaja, or rock pool, is often a source of fresh, clear water that has been a popular swimming spot for generations of rafters. Today, the recent heavy rains have filled it to overflowing and some of the higher spots, such as the birth canal, are too wet for any of us to want to brave. The ferns that give the canyon its name make the walls a verdant green, and fossil-spotting is easy.

Back on the water, we continue our float.
Ancient up-thrusts have angled the lines in the

Having spent the night at the Ten Bits Ranch in Terlingua, my appetite for desert lore and incredible food is already whetted. Ten Bits owners Jennifer and Steve Wick have built a small Western town on their beautiful 125 acres just 20 minutes from Big Bend National Park, and each storefront is actually a charming and unique room in their bed and breakfast. Steve is a Paleontology Field Associate in the park, and he is happy to tell you all about the many fossils he has on display in the dining room. Jennifer is happiest in the kitchen, and made dinner something to remember. Along with classic comfort food like the amazingly tender marinated pork roast, mashed potatoes and green beans with her own special twist, the spinach salad was the best we'd ever had — probably the first time I've ever begged for a spinach salad recipe!

Our stay at Ten Bits, with its sweeping views of this remote area, was the perfect transition from civilization to a desert outing. Now we wonder what lies ahead as we watch our guides outfit the oar boats they will row and get acquainted with our fellow adventurers.

Dry bags, coolers, and plastic crates are loaded without comment. But then some unexpected gear appears — a metal rack filled with wine glasses. Wine glasses? On a rafting trip? It's a reminder that this is no ordinary river trip, and that more awaits us down stream than remote and unspoiled desert wilderness that most people will never see.

Floating Along

Here in the Big Bend region of Texas, the Rio Grande is rarely a fast river. Even after heavy rains, you won't find the big rapids that most people associate with rafting. We float along, our favorite beverages in hand, talking, admiring the scenery, and listening to our guide tell stories about the places we're floating past or share her knowledge of the local flora and geology. With oar boats the guides do all the work, so we're free to just kick back and enjoy.

We stop for lunch and our guides serve up pasta salad and a variety of sandwich fixings. Then it's back on the river. The mountains that seemed so far away when we first put in are getting closer, and soon our guide points out "The Sentinel," a still distant ridge that marks the entrance to our destination: Santa Elena Canyon.

An hour later we land on a large beach just above the canyon entrance. Our guides tell us to pick our campsites, and we wander off to find out perfect sleeping spots. Our guides bring tents and offer to set them up for us. We find the drybags we've been given that hold our personal gear, and settle in.

While we've been setting up house, our guides have been busy. A long dining table with white linen has appeared, and another smaller, linen-draped table holds mouthwatering hors d'oeuvres, including goose liver pate, shrimp, and cheeses.

A kitchen has been put together, and the bustle of activity there is being led by the classic picture of a chef, complete with chef's coat, pants and cap. He is making rack of lamb in the middle of the desert, the outer canyon walls rising behind him.

Ancient up thrusts have angled the lines in the rock, creating the illusion that we are floating down a steep incline.

An Oasis in the Canyon

We stop for the night at a large, grass covered beach deep in the canyon. The tents go up, the linen-covered tables come out, and once again we are treated to incredible appetizers as we sip wine and watch the sun move along the canyon rim. A peregrine falcon's screech echoes off the rock, and our talk turns to speculation about tonight's menu.



We are not disappointed. The first dish, large, tender scallops over angel hair pasta, melts in our mouths, but Frankie surpasses himself with the main course, glazed duck with fresh vegetables in a demi glace. This is followed by another rich, creamy dessert, made with Grand Marnier and whipping cream.

As dinner ends, the music starts. We sing along, and those of us who play take turns passing Cooter's guitar around. We all know this is our last night and we make the most of it. We head for bed, assured of a plentiful breakfast in the morning and looking forward to floating out of the canyon by lunch time.

A Civilized Hideout

After another leisurely breakfast, we're back the rafts. The end of the canyon is a short way ahead, and before we know it we're out. With Big Bend National Park to our left and Mexico to our right, we stop for lunch before putting in one last time and heading for the final take out. The vans are there to meet us, and we stand around sharing last jokes, private flasks, and contact information as the guides get everything off the rafts and onto the trailers. Then it's back to Far Flung headquarters and our vehicles.

Frankie heads back to San Antonio, and others turn homeward as well, but we're not done with the desert yet. We head west to Lajitas for a couple of nights at the Lajitas Resort: the Ultimate Hideout.



Chef Francois Maeder, or Frankie as we become friends, is the chef/owner of Crumpets in San Antonio. When he's not running his highly popular four star restaurant, Frankie loves to be on the river. He has oared his own raft, filled with supplies, but now he's the star of this Far Flung River Expeditions Gourmet Float Trip. On recent trips, Maeder's menus, accompanied by wines from Texas vineyards, have included mushroom-stuffed wild quail, marinated Gulf shrimp en brochette, fettuccine with pine nuts, and prickly pear and strawberry trifle.

Frankie has brought a notable array of wine from Crumpets' cellars, and we gather to enjoy the offerings and the tantalizing smells coming from the makeshift kitchen. Our rough and ready guides have donned "evening wear" that lends a note of frivolity to their duties as kitchen helpers and servers. The rest of us just kick back, enjoying the show, the scenery, and the delectable goodies.



As darkness falls, dinner is served. We start with spinach fettuccine with sun dried tomatoes and snap peas. Next comes a salad, and finally the rack of lamb. The wine continues to pass around the table, and the celebratory mood grows as millions of stars fill the sky. Dessert is whipped cream with Bailey's Irish Cream and shaved almonds, its sinful richness a marked contrast to the simplicity of our surroundings.

After dinner there is cognac, coffee, and story telling. A local musician, who once played with Patsy Cline and Ray Price, strums softly in the background until most of the guests retire into the darkness and the comfort of their tents and only a few night owls remain around the still blazing campfire on the beach.

Breakfast by the Beach

Morning in the desert is a special time. The coolness of the night still lingers a bit, colors are bright and sharp, and the evaporating dew releases the subtle aromas of the desert plants. Today these scents are joined by the smell of Frankie's special blend of coffee and a tantalizing scent of breakfast. No pancakes or cereal for us. Breakfast is eggs benedict on croissants and lovely breakfast pastries. Juice, mimosas, and lots of coffee slake our thirst. This is roughing it?

Telecommunications millionaire Steve Smith bought this border town and has already invested \$85 million to make it a very private, world-class resort. After three days on the river, we're looking forward to luxury bedding, Jacuzzi tubs, and dinner at the Ocotillo Restaurant.

Our condo is everything we could hope for, with fireplaces in the bedroom and the living room, flat screen tvs, Wi-Fi Internet access, a full kitchen, and a large balcony with a desert view. We find there is also a lot to do here. Along with the expected swimming pool and shopping opportunities. There is golf, horseback riding, hunting, hiking, skeet shooting, and a cowboy action shooting range. The spa is being expanded to offer a full-range of treatments.

We also discover a variety of weekly events, including learning about aromatic herbs, wine tasting, mixed drink classes, and cooking classes with chef Blas Gonzales (formerly of Hudson's on the Bend in Austin).



The par 71 golf course at Lajitas takes full advantage of its remote location. It's the only golf course in the U.S. with a 19th hole in Mexico! Air conditioned reload shacks provide beverages, snacks and bathrooms every three holes so the desert heat never need keep you from a good round.

Will all there is to do, expect to work up and appetite. The resort offers two restaurants, the Candelilla and the Ocotillo. Executive Chef Santiago de la Cruz presides over the kitchen at the less formal Candelilla. He delights in experimenting with the produce from the resort's 26 acre fruit and vegetable farm. Chilis, squash, tomatoes, peppers, apricots, limes, apples, figs, and more are grown without pesticides.

While the resort is a world away from de la Cruz's last position as Executive Chef at the Wyndham Peachtree Conference Center in Atlanta, Georgia, he is at home here. He varies the menu frequently, and revels in putting together special tapas dinners for larger groups.

Over at the Ocotillo, dining is a more elegant experience. The full bar offers every type of spirit, and the wine cellar is surprisingly deep and varied. The menu may offer elk quail



After breakfast we gather our personal gear so the tents can be packed, and those looking to stretch their legs follow our guides up to the ridge top to gaze over into the entrance to Santa Elena Canyon. We can see miles into Mexico, the Rio Grande glittering in the early morning sun.

Then it's back to the rafts and our adventure continues. We enter the canyon and the cliff walls rise on both sides. Canyon wrens are a frequent sight, and the plant life is surprisingly plentiful given the rocky terrain. The sky is a blue ribbon overhead, and the sun illuminates the many colors in the rock face.

and varied. The menu may offer elk, quail, salmon, Permian basin shrimp, and prime rib. It's hard to believe such incredible cuisine (and great service) can be found so far from "civilization."

So whether you drive in or take advantage of the resort's 7,500 foot runway and FBO and fly in on your own plane, there's a great get away waiting for you in the desert of west Texas — and you won't lack for great food and wine as you leave the rest of civilization behind.

If you go:

Ten Bits Ranch

Terlingua, Texas
(866) 371-3110

<http://www.tenbitsranch.com>

Far Flung Outdoor Center

Terlingua, Texas 79852
800-839-7238

www.farflungoutdoorcenter.com

Lajitas - The Ultimate Hideout

Lajitas, Texas 79852
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Big Bend information: www.visitbigbend.com

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The Degustateer Rides Again

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The Degustateer Rides Again: A Quest for Texas Wine - Part 1 by Susan Cashin

I know immediately you are asking what is a degustateer? Please allow me to explain and then I shall tell you of my quest and we will be off at full gallop.

At the very beginning of my two year intensive study with the International Sommelier Guild's –Sommelier Diploma Program – I came across a word I had never seen before, degustateer. According to the Oxford English dictionary a degustateer (French variation) or degustator (English) is "one who degusts, or tastes as a connoisseur. Being an inveterate punster the thought came to me that this was the perfect name for our study group. Similar to the Musketeers we were bound to each other as we rode together on our mission to learn the wines and spirits of the world. The task was arduous and tough, culminating with two days of



There exist 5 major pieces or components to view in order to understand the Texas wine industry of today. They are as follows

- Research and Development
- Legislative Issues – State and Federal
- Distribution & Marketing
- Growers and Winemakers
- Consumers