

A PILGRIMAGE TO ONE OF THE LAST NATURAL HOT-SPRINGS



By Dale Weisman
Photographs by Laurence Parent

I'm basking

in a hot-springs pool, soaking it all in: the immense desert solitude, serrated mountains ablaze in the morning light, and a trio of high notes—babbling water, rustling cottonwood leaves, and sprightly birdsong.

This is my heart's destination: Chinati Hot Springs, a rustic resort tucked away near the U.S.-Mexico border in the wilds of Presidio County.

I traveled here to satisfy two desires: wanderlust and tranquility. My "inner Cabeza de Vaca" wanted an adventurous West Texas road trip, a journey beyond where the pavement ends. On the other hand, wouldn't it be delightful to turn off the ignition and kick back at a secluded hot-springs oasis?

The road to Chinati begins in Marfa, where I head southwest on FM 2810, a blue highway that winds 54 miles to the tiny border village of Ruidosa. Also called Pinto Canyon Road, FM 2810 is one of the most spectacular drives in Texas. The blacktop cuts across mile-high desert grasslands rimmed by the Davis, Del Norte, and Chinati mountains. If the stark scenery looks familiar, you might have seen this big country in recent films like *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*, or in the 1955 classic *Giant*—all shot around Marfa.

Mary Baxter immerses herself in the restorative waters and serenity of Chinati Hot Springs, southwest of Marfa. The geothermal springs gurggle forth at an ahh-inspiring 109 degrees.

Road to Chinati

RETREATS IN TEXAS **SOOTHES BODY AND SOUL**

ROAD TO CHINATI

Most maps show FM 2810 petering out 32 miles south of Marfa. Indeed, the pavement ends. But the road goes on—a rough, unpaved track that slices through Pinto Canyon and the forbidding Chinati range and rolls toward Ruidosa on the

Rio Grande. The stretch plummets into a chasm awash in ochre and amber hues, hence the name “Pinto” (Spanish for painted). The rust-colored rimrock of the Chinati Mountains—a tossed salad of igneous intrusions, uplifted lava flows, and metamorphic and sedimentary rock—towers overhead. The massif tops out at 7,728-foot Chinati Peak, one of the Big Bend region’s loftiest.

Chinati, or *chinate*, means “black bird”

in this region. Why the mountain range bears that avian name is as much a mystery as the bobbling Marfa Lights, said to arise near the Chinatis at night.

Private ranch land borders both sides of Pinto Canyon Road. Mindful of trespassing, I stop here and there to gather colorful rocks at stream crossings, photograph javelinas and free-range horses, and ponder some adobe ruins built for the 1950 Western *High Lonesome*.



STEEPED IN HISTORY

“The hot springs have an intriguing, compelling history,” says Chinati owner Jeff Fort.

Much of that history is steeped in lore. Native Americans frequented the springs for thousands of years. Cabeza de Vaca passed this way around 1535, and by some accounts, Spanish explorers visited the springs in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The hot springs’ first known owners were members of the Kingston family, who bought the acreage around 1898 so that they could take advantage of the springs’ healing qualities. One Kingston clan member purportedly bathed in the spring water to cure his arthritis, and was eventually able to walk without a cane.

“We don’t know if the stories are true,” admits co-manager David Sines. However, the book *Taking the Waters in Texas*, by Janet Valenza, confirms some of the lore. The author recounts how the Kingstons piped the spring water into bathhouses, built cabins, and opened the resort to the public in 1937 as Kingston Hot Springs, which operated until 1990.

Donald Judd, the artist who put Marfa on the minimalist map, acquired the land in the early 1990s. Following his death in 1994, the resort remained closed and fell into disrepair. Photographer Richard Fenker bought the property from the Judd estate and reopened it in 1998 as Chinati Hot Springs. Operating the springs as a nonprofit retreat, Fenker hosted photography, nature, and New Age workshops. In 2004, rancher and businessman Jeff Fort bought the property.

Nowadays, Jeff’s vision for Chinati Hot Springs is simple: “Keep it the way it is.” —DALE WEISMAN



Nearly two hours after leaving Marfa, I reach Chinati Hot Springs as dusk falls. A passel of barking dogs greets my arrival. Four of them belong to the amiable caretakers, David and Krissy Sines, who have managed this canine-friendly place since March 2003.

David shows me to my room, El Patron, an adobe cabin with a private courtyard and hot-springs tub. Its decor

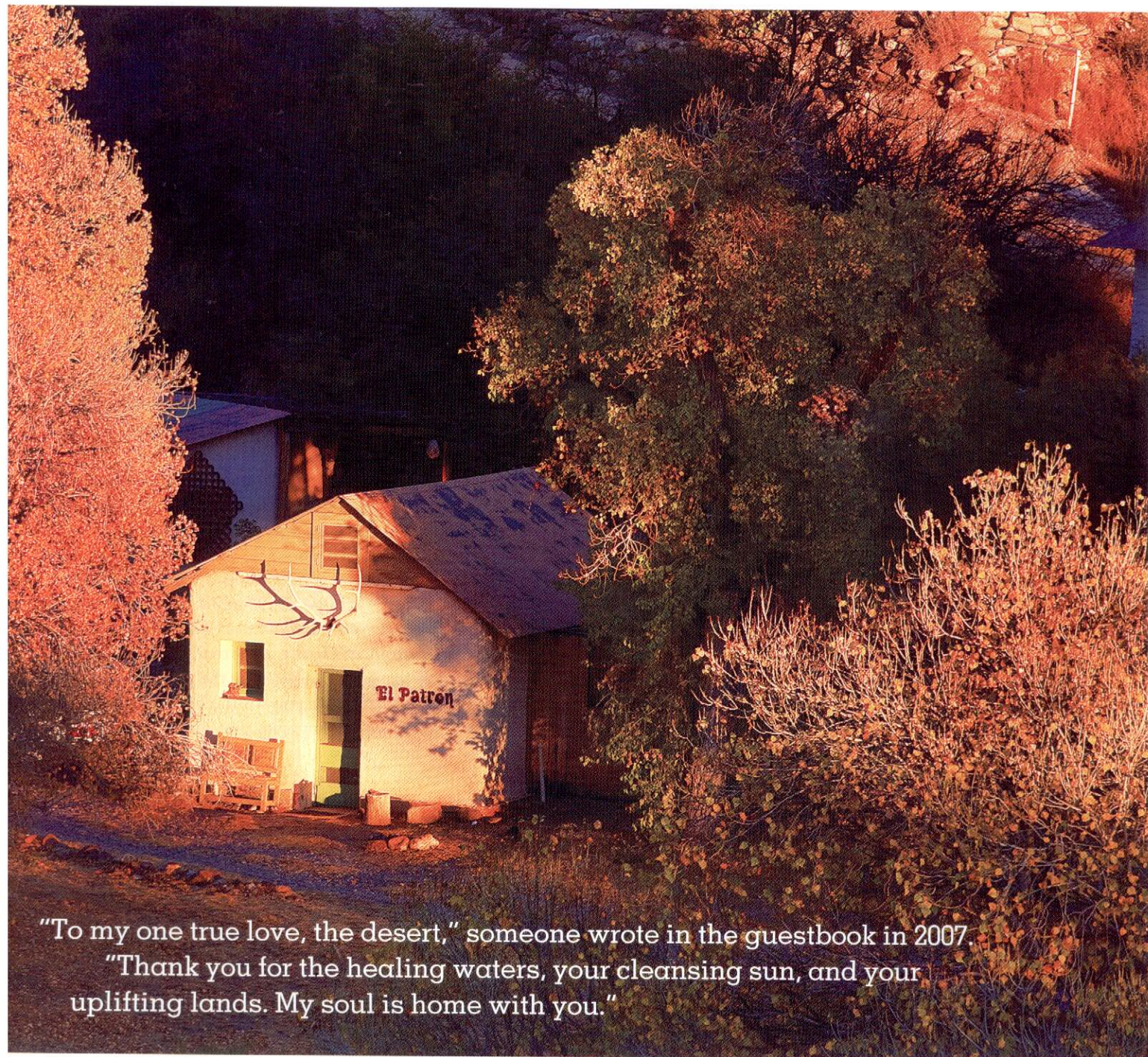
blends Old with New Mexico: elk antlers above a green door, whitewashed walls, and rustic Mexican furniture, blankets, and pottery.

That evening, I join the Sineses for chicken enchiladas in the retreat's spacious kitchen and dining room, construct-

ed of Mexican adobe bricks. Built a couple of years ago, the welcoming kitchen is an essential guest amenity since the nearest restaurant is an hour away in Presidio.

"The kitchen creates a communal spirit, a place for people to cook and hang out," says David, whose dread-

Hot springs-seekers can choose from Chinati's seven lodging options. **LEFT:** The Numero Uno room, with a queen-size bed and foldout couch, sits next to an outdoor hot tub. **RIGHT:** Tucked among the trees, El Patron is one of four adobe cabins built in the 1930s by the resort's original owners.



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"Thank you for the healing waters, your cleansing sun, and your uplifting lands. My soul is home with you."

ROAD TO CHINATI

locks befit his artistic calling: metal sculptor. David and Krissy, a muralist and an art historian, moved here from Dallas on a phone-message dare from a Marfa buddy: "I've got a life-changing proposition for you."

Although Big Bend was terra incognita for the couple, they decided to check out the hot springs—in need of caretakers—in late 2002. The evening they arrived, they sat in a communal tub of steam-

Across the creek, a hiking trail loops across the Chihuahuan Desert. The birding is exceptional. "We get all kinds of birds—painted buntings, cardinals, and elf owls," says David, "and also have sightings of javelinas, coyotes, foxes, mule deer, and wild burros."

"This place has become my vision of art," says David. He helped construct the stone-lined, communal hot tub and laid rock for stairs, trails, and retaining walls. In turn, Krissy spiced up guestroom decor with bright colors and objets d'art. Her favorite room is El Presidente, dubbed "the Elvis room" by guests who love the velvet painting of "The King" and other

and communal baths. The water emerges from the pipes at around 109 degrees Fahrenheit, perfect for whatever ails you. Eventually all the spring water trickles into a series of acequias (irrigation ditches) used to water shade and fruit trees, shrubs, and vegetables.

David and Krissy drink the mineral water now and then, believing it to be safe for occasional consumption. I try the water as well, finding it soft, tasteless, and odorless.

According to a Texas Water Development Board report, the water has been dated back more than 21,000 years, and has traces of dissolved solids rang-

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ing mineral water while sleet rained down on them. The magical moment hooked them.

"We fell in love with the place," says David. "This was one of those opportunities that only comes around once in life."

Now into their fifth year as hosts, the Sineses have outlasted previous caretakers, who came and went every few months. According to Krissy, when West Texas rancher and businessman Jeff Fort bought the 640-acre hot-springs property in 2004, it "made a world of difference."

"When the property came up for sale, I thought it would be something I'd like to get involved in to have it done right—more of a restoration than a rebuild," says Jeff.

In addition to building the adobe kitchen, Jeff and the Sineses transformed a hilltop cistern into a swimming pool brimming with spring water cooled by a waterfall. Guests now have a place to chill out during the summer and admire the panoramic views of Hot Springs Creek and the surrounding mountains.

memorabilia as much as the room's sunken mineral bath.

With help from Jeff, the Sineses also turned an old bunkhouse into separate guest quarters and added a new cabin to the existing structures, which date to the 1930s.

"It's nice to keep this place going and help preserve it," says Jeff. "There's nothing better than coming in here on a cold evening and using the hot springs. The water does something for you."

The geothermal water is said to cure everything except laziness. After soaking in the communal pool one sunny morning and then in the evening when a billion stars sparkled overhead, I'd say the hot mineral water actually induces healthy bouts of laziness.

The Spanish term for hot springs is *ojo caliente* ("hot eye"). Once free flowing, Chinati's "hot eye" is now channeled into a concrete box above the outdoor pool. The water is pumped from the springs into a network of pipes feeding into the private

ing from arsenic to zinc. The report calls it "old groundwater, possibly part of a deep-flow system unaffected by modern recharge."

"We don't know if the springs are being replenished," says David. "The flow has gone way down. In the 1970s, it produced about 25 gallons a minute. Now we're getting about 15 gallons a minute."

I hope this fountain of youth flows forever—for countless guests to come.

"To my one true love, the desert," someone wrote in the guestbook in 2007. "Thank you for the healing waters, your cleansing sun, and your uplifting lands. My soul is home with you."

Beyond the reach of cell phones, traffic, and worldly woes, Chinati Hot Springs is my soul's home, too.★

For details on planning a trip to Chinati Hot Springs, see page 33.

Big Bend enthusiast DALE WEISMAN loves hot springs and excursions off the beaten track.

While working on this story, LAURENCE PARENT not only enjoyed long soaks in the hot springs, but also "being in an area with no cell-phone service."

A pool with a view: Soak and admire the setting moon over the Chinati Mountains in Mexico.

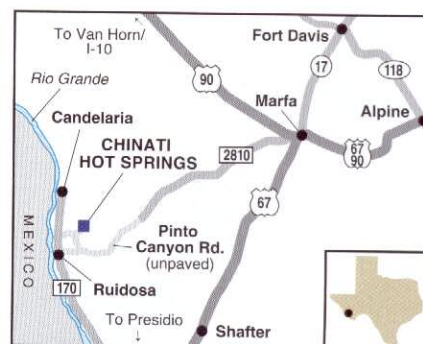
essentials SUPER SOAKING

CHINATI HOT SPRINGS is about 50 miles southwest of **Marfa**, via FM 2810 (Pinto Canyon Rd.). From Marfa's main street (Highland Ave.), drive west a few blocks on US 90 to Moonlight Gemstones (432/729-4526, www.moonlightgemstones.com). This first-rate rock shop marks the left turn south onto FM 2810. The last 20 miles of FM 2810 are unpaved, and portions of the road through Pinto Canyon are steep and rough, with several stream crossings. *Avoid this route during heavy rains.* While you don't need 4-wheel-drive, it's best to use a high-clearance vehicle with good tires. Allow about an hour and 45 minutes for the drive. See the Web site (listed below) for an alternate route.

Chinati Hot Springs opens year round. *Reservations are a must.* Rates range from \$75 for rooms with shared baths to \$115 for the deluxe El Patron Cabin and El Presidente Suite. The entire resort (7 rooms) is available for reunions and group retreats for \$650 per night. Camping is available for \$15 per person. Guests have free use of the mineral baths. Day use of the baths is \$12.50 per person. The swimming pool is closed during winter. Guests have full use of the communal kitchen, picnic areas, and grills, and should bring their own groceries for meals.

For details, contact Chinati Hot Springs, Inc., 432/229-4165; www.chinatihotsprings.com.

For more on attractions in the area, see "Head on Down the Road" on page 35.



A long-abandoned panel truck punctuates the pristine mountain scene along FM 2810.

■ To order a print of this photograph, call 866/962-1191, or visit www.texashighwaysprints.com.