



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STACY SODOLAK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. PERMISSION BY JUDD FOUNDATION / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY, NEW YORK

ahead. Look at that road! With nothing on it!

"This would be a good time to stand in the middle of the road," Beth said. And she was the family therapist. The reasonable one! It was a spur of the moment suggestion. No reasoning behind it. We might be getting older, but in Texas, in the desert, you can still pull over, jump in the middle of the road and not a soul will know about it.

We hopped out of the car and screamed our heads off, drunk with all of the space. And it was exhilarating! When my children were little, I told them not to run into the street about 100 times. (Maybe more?) Here we were, four women in our mid-40s. It went against all of our instincts as responsible adults, and we let those instincts go into the wind that night.

When you leave town, it's a deep dive into rural West Texas.

The sun was quickly dropping into the desert so, after our "I'm the queen of the road" stunt, we got back in the S.U.V. and I revved up to 80 again. In my path were two large black crows, snacking on roadkill. I slowed down a bit so they would have time to ascend, but one got caught by the wind and it swooped down with a sharp force. My car plunged into it, everyone screamed and the bird propelled into my windshield. I did what any sane person would do when something large is coming at you: I ducked, yet my hands remained steady on the wheel.

For whatever reason — maybe it was the desolate road, maybe it was how fast I was

driving, or my desert head space — my instinct was to simply duck, not to swerve. I'm a good driver. I can take a highway or a city street. But this was not a normal reflex. I'm telling you, I didn't move that wheel. I'm going to chalk it up to adrenaline. Something raced inside of me that said "Get your head down. Now."

After we all calmed down a bit, once the screaming was over, Beth put her hand on my elbow. She asked me if I was O.K. I nodded.

"You handled that perfectly," Beth said, trying to calm me.

"I didn't handle it perfectly at all," I said. "I killed an enormous bird." I knew it was dead. It had catapulted into the field behind us. I saw it in the rearview mirror when I briefly peeked.

The manic energy leading up to that moment flattened out. Music turned down. Everyone still. But that black bird was not my albatross. I wouldn't let it be, I told myself (and it wasn't, but all of that driving will play tricks on you), and so we sailed along the road, quieter, through the low tawny grass, past the sprawling ranches along U.S. 90 to a spot we had all been talking about visiting: The Prada Marfa.

Then there it was, a shining beacon of consumerism, nestled into the landscape, this landmark, Prada Marfa, a fake Prada store, a symbol of wealth and prosperity. Right in the middle of the desert, about 37 miles northwest of Marfa. It's a small building that looks like a stand-alone storefront with wide windows. A few purses and shoes on display, donated by Miuccia Prada. Absolutely nothing else but miles and miles of empty ranchland on each side of it.

This building is a lone rider, is as if someone had airlifted it into the desert. Or an



apocalyptic relic, the only sign left of modern commercialism.

The Berlin artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset built the cultural landmark in 2005 with the help of the Marfa art collective, Ballroom Marfa. In 2014, Beyoncé did a split jump in front of the structure, posting it to her Instagram and sealing the Prada Marfa's cultural fate forever.

A pink sky erupted around the building as we modeled in our most Instagrammable poses. This may sound cliché, but at sunset, it truly does feel like you've entered a painting. So yes, the visit to Prada Marfa was worth it. Dead bird and all.

In the morning, we hit Marfa Burrito again to fuel up before our drive out of town.

Ramona recognized me and waved from the kitchen with her brilliant smile, calling out, "Hola, chica!" This time her sister-in-law Lucy, a warm woman with beautiful blue eyes and thick lashes, took my order. The line was out the door.

We made our way up State Highway 17 to Davis Mountains State Park — average elevation about 5,000 feet — for a hike. We usually hike at least once on our road trips. Why not hit the highest point in Texas? It was sunny and bright that morning, this time, the Chinati Mountains in the distance popped up over the desert landscape. We played an eclectic soundtrack: Fleetwood Mac's "Sara," the B-52's "Dance This Mess Around" and Willie Nelson's "On The Road Again."

"I don't want to go home," Sara said. A cancer survivor, she didn't want to face follow-up tests. But I also knew that she didn't want to get back to work, the day-to-day routine. None of us did. And who wants to when you can surround yourself with art, eat fantastic food and drive on long, empty roads. This trip was a dream. I missed my children and husband on every trip I had ever been on, but this time, I was content to drive my way into this beautiful country of ours, through the fields and crevices and never reappear again.

A FEW HOURS LATER, after the hike, we pulled into Blue Agate and Rocks, a small roadside crystal shop — the sign above the door simply says "Rock Shop" — in Fort Davis, about 21 miles from Marfa. The owner, Donna Trammell, was a petite, older woman, her face etched with lines, perhaps from years of crystal-hunting in the West Texas sun.

"How do you pick a crystal?" I asked her, dizzy from the dozens of glittering rocks that packed her shelves. "You have so many."

"You have to listen to the rocks; they talk to you," she said, passing a row of 30-pound purple amethysts and smaller, metallic iron pyrite. "I'm serious. If you pass one spot and pick it up, it's because the rock is talking to you."

A large chunk of selenite, also known as a shaman stone, spoke to me. It was a cloudy white crystal with thick jags, a little larger than the palm of my hand and reminded me of the moon.

It was our last day in West Texas and we were determined to pack it in. Still in our sweaty hiking clothes, we drove straight to the Chinati Foundation (another decommissioned army base that Judd had turned into an art compound) to experience Judd's "15 untitled works in concrete," which is essentially 15 giant gray rectangles settled in the middle of sprawling ranchland. I ran my fingers through the high yellowed grasses, relishing the open space and these architectural formations.

Maybe my face seemed content and wise, because a small group approached us with a confused look. "Help us," a woman from Houston said, pleading. "Did you get it? We don't get it. Help us get it."

We tried some textbook explanations about how the concrete boxes are unexpected, an alteration of reality. When none of



that worked, I told her in my blunt East Coast manner, "We don't have fields like this in New Jersey."

Down the road was the permanent exhibit, "From Dawn to Dusk," by the large-scale installation artist Robert Irwin that had opened in July 2016. There were two entrances: One is light, the other is dark. We walked in from the dark side, gradually making our way into the light. This is the way you want to end a trip. Basking in the light, completely transformed and blissed out.

And in the light, that was when we spotted him: a tall, handsome cowboy giving a small art tour. Every Thelma and Louise road trip story like ours needed a Brad Pitt moment and we found ours at the Chinati Foundation.

His name was Chris Cole and truly, he looked like Richard Prince's Marlboro Man with his unmussed brown corduroy jacket, tall cowboy build, long hair and 10-gallon hat. We overheard him talking about ranch water and because there's nothing wrong with flirting, we asked what it was. Turns out ranch water was a simple mix of tequila, lime juice and soda water.

"Nothing special, but fun to say," he said. "Thanks for coming all the way to Marfa." And he seemed like he meant it.

Chris the Cowboy — or as we called him later that night, the "Hottie from Chinati," as we gulped down our ranch waters at the Hotel Saint George bar, where we stopped in for a drink after dinner — had walked away into the sunset.

Our last night in the trailer, the four of us cozied up under colorful serapes, reading animal spirit cards. We were wistful about leaving Marfa and leaving each other. It would probably be another year until the four of us set out on another adventure.

Before we left town on that bright Sunday morning, we stopped again at Marfa Burrito. Ramona and Lucy invited us to the back, in the kitchen, where we hugged them and thanked them for feeding us for our entire trip. "That's what we do, feed people and make them feel good," Lucy said. They certainly did.



From top: Marfa Contemporary, an art museum; the Capri; the Palace Theater, now an illustrator's studio; Marfa Burrito, which is popular with locals and visitors; and creamed corn from Al Campo, a rustic bistro and wine garden.