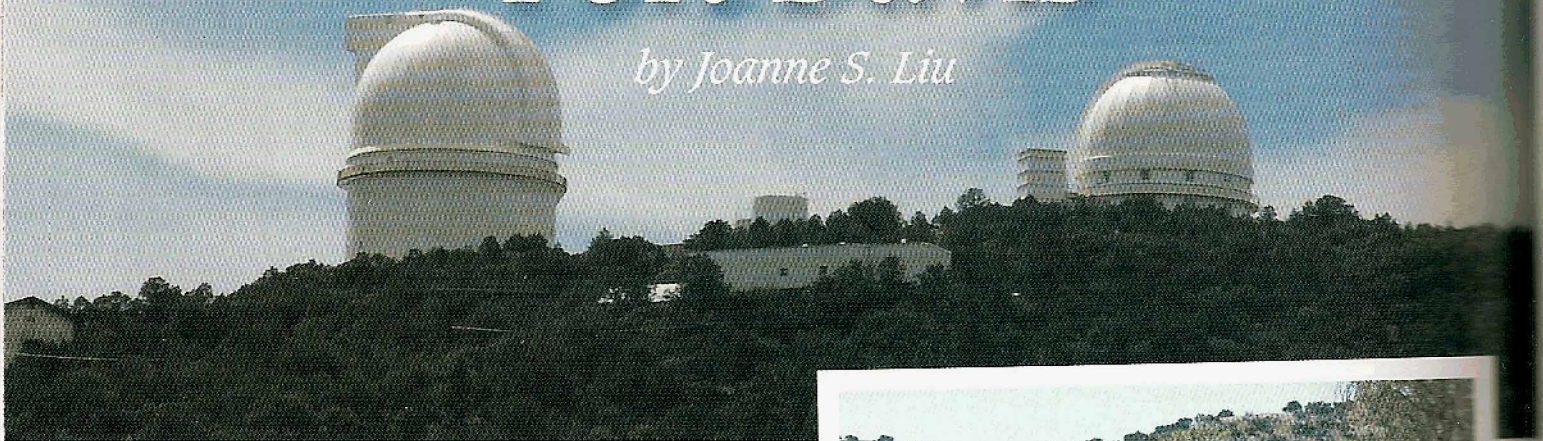


FAMILY FUN & TRAVEL

Texas's Mile-High Town Shines Like a Diamond in the Sky

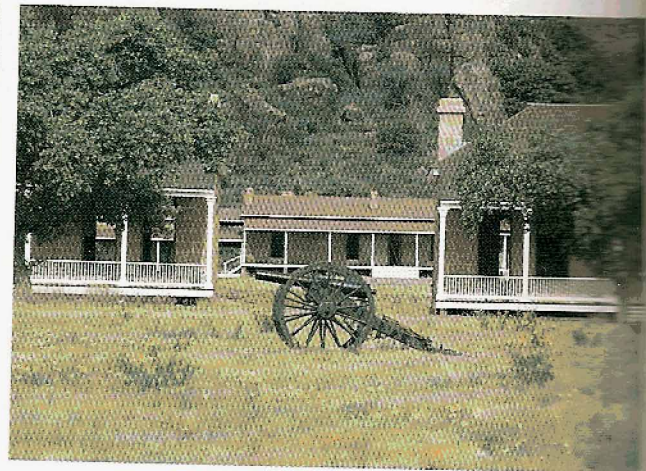
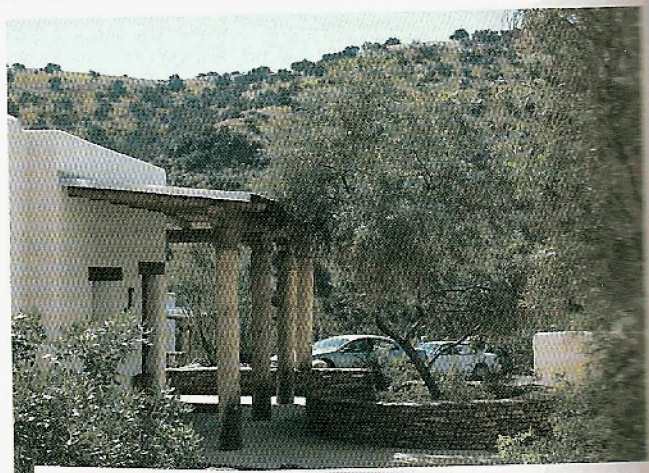
Family Retreat to Fort Davis

by Joanne S. Liu



When was the last time you looked up and spotted a twinkling star? If you're having trouble remembering, then it's time to wander away from those big city lights (or suburban street lamps) and make your way to Fort Davis in West Texas. At 5,050 feet, Fort Davis is the Lone Star State's own mile-high town. It's also home to McDonald Observatory, one of the world's major astronomical centers, where scientists from around the world unfold the universe's secrets under one of the darkest night skies in the continental United States.

Once a thriving civilian settlement adjacent to a 19th-century military post, Fort Davis provided a much-needed respite for travelers on the Chihuahua Trail and the San Antonio-El Paso Road. Today, it remains an oasis. While most Texans endure summertime swelter, residents and visitors bask in the cool breezes of the Davis Mountains and the crisp, fresh waters of Limpia Creek. That's because Fort Davis's higher altitude makes for cooler temps. Many residents claim it has the best weather in the state. Kelly Williams of Davis Mountains Realty agrees and says the best time to visit is late summer when rain has "made everything green again and the creeks are usually running."



Vacation with the Stars

A trip to Fort Davis is not complete without a stop at McDonald Observatory, which houses several telescopes including the world's largest telescope mirror, the Hobby-Eberly Telescope. Atop Mount Locke and Mount Fowlkes, your family will find a celestial playground. Mark Mitchell, author of the nonfiction children's book *Seeing Stars*, says that children find the Observatory fascinating because it "looks just like a kid would expect an observatory to look." He compares the Spectroscopic Survey Telescope to "something out of a Star Trek movie" and says, "a fascination with the night sky and its implications must be hardwired into us from birth."

Evening Star Parties are a must-attend event. Rebecca Johnson, the Observatory's press contact and editor of *StarDate* magazine, says, "Behind our visitors' center, we have two telescope domes open to the public. We also set up telescopes outside the dome, and at each telescope there's someone there explaining what you're looking at."

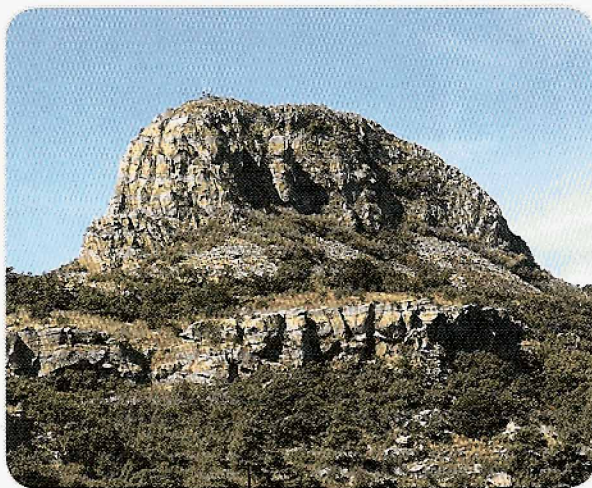
Each Star Party is unique because conditions vary. Clouds and the moon's brightness affect the view. Most times, visitors can view a planet, such as Jupiter or Venus. "If you have a clear sky and a dark moon, then you might look at star clusters or planetary nebulae, which are gases around dead stars," says Johnson. For additional details, check out the Observatory website, www.mcdonaldobservatory.org.

If Star Parties begin too late for your children's bedtime, you can always take a daytime self-guided tour. Your children

can look far out into the horizon with the help of pay-per-view telescopes. Check out the observatory website (www.mcdonaldobservatory.org).

This Trip is for the Birds

Fort Davis offers more fun in the sky besides stars and planets. Bird lovers flock to Fort Davis, whose prime location in the Davis Mountains and the Trans-Pecos region creates a bird watcher's paradise. According to real estate broker Williams, avid bird watchers purchase land to secure their own vantage points.



Barry Lyon leads birding tours through Austin-based Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, which claims to be the world's largest company specializing in birding tours. He says that Texas is a "treasure trove for bird watchers" because "it encompasses a lot of different ecosystems and habitats." According to Lyon, there are approximately 630 species in the state, and the Big Bend and Davis Mountains areas boast "a number of species that you find that don't occur in the rest of the state or are hard to find."

Although you can bird-watch any time, Lyon says that the best times are

the cooler parts of the day—morning and afternoon. What's his advice for introducing kids to bird watching? "Make sure you have a decent pair of binoculars—you're doing yourself a disservice if you use a shoddy piece of equipment," he says. Bring along a field guide," he adds; "with these two basic tools, you'll be able to see birds better and know what you're looking at."

Davis Mountains State Park, which encompasses more than 2,700 acres, is a popular venue for bird watching. It's also an ideal location for family gatherings.

Lyon says, "There's hiking, camping, a lot of level ground, and birds are plentiful there." Lisa Nugent, executive director of the Fort Davis Chamber of Commerce, recommends it for its "numerous trails and spectacular views as well as a varied group of rare animals to be seen."

Take a Hike

If you're looking for more fun at ground level, the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center & Botanical Gardens offers 507 acres of playground space. Executive Director Dr. Cathryn Hoyt invites visitors to explore the botanical gardens or take on several miles of hiking trails. Don't be surprised if you encounter wildlife along the way—lizards, birds, butterflies, and deer may cross your paths.

Guided hikes of 1½ miles are popular. Hoyt comments, "Whether the hike is suitable to younger children really depends on the child. We've had some 4-year-olds do the hike with energy to spare, and some 10-year-olds sit down and refuse to go a step further!"

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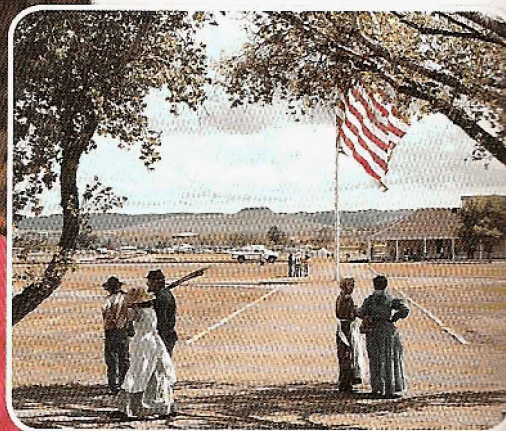
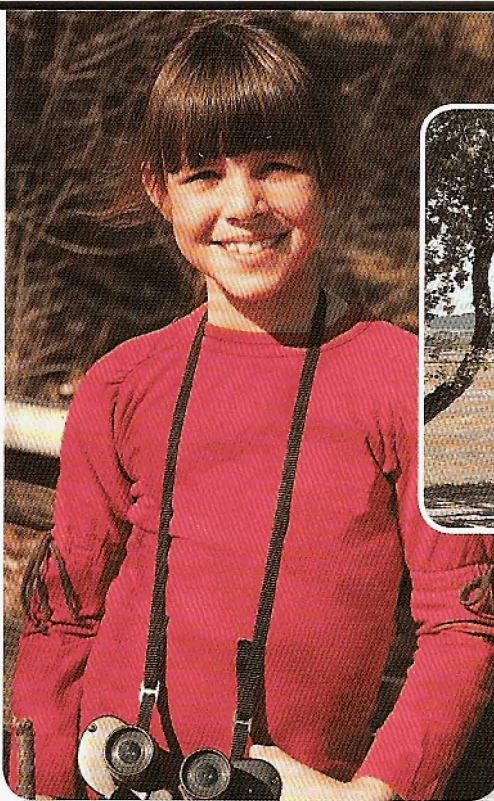
The Center offers educational programs, including the Desert Explorer activity guide. "The kids are given a booklet and a bag of tools (magnifying glass, water bottle, etc.) and are sent to different stations in the botanical gardens to learn about desert ecology." In addition, Hoyt says, "We've had kids making paper out of natural fibers, learning how to use binoculars while being introduced to bird watching, and learning how to plant cactus without getting your thumbs full of spines."

Hoyt recommends the Center's mining heritage exhibit. Kids especially enjoy Dinamito, a life-size replica of a Sicilian burro that was born in a mine shaft and prospected for gold and silver.

If you'd like to dig up the region's frontier history, head to Fort Davis National Historic Site. Nugent of the Chamber of Commerce points out its extensive medical, weapons, and attire displays. Visual guides illustrate the rough lives of the people who tamed the Old West, a surefire way to stoke your children's imaginations. During the summer, workers don period uniforms for

Star light, Star bright

You don't need to be in Fort Davis to stargaze. Rebecca Johnson has a few ideas to put you on the right track. She says, "The best thing to do is to find a dark site, anywhere away from city lights but that's also safe." Johnson says that Austin-area stargazers prefer the Wild Basin Preserve and the Canyon of the Eagles. In other areas of the state, "state parks are good places to go," she says, "and some of them even have stargazing parties." Check out <http://stardate.org/nightsky/bgide/> (Beginner's Guide to Stargazing) and <http://stardate.org/nightsky/constellations/> (Constellation Guide).



get enough of the food can purchase a recipe book filled with restaurant favorites from the hotel gift shop. You can meander through the shop for all sorts of treasures and souvenirs.

Where do you head when children catch the munchies? Dining is casual and kid friendly. Local favorites include Murphy's Pizzeria & Café, Pop's Grill (hamburgers are in high demand), Rodney's Phat Burger (with an arcade in the back), and The Drugstore (old-fashioned soda fountain, including breakfast menu and daily buffet). Nugent recommends the Caboose Ice Cream shop as a must-stop for children.

Whether you long for a breath of fresh air, a view of starry skies, or a glimpse of fair fauna, Fort Davis will restore your family's appreciation of nature's wondrous qualities. It's worth a trip through Texas' windblown land to find yourself in this West Texas paradise. ★

added spice in their living-history talks. Children who complete a one- to two-hour program earn "Junior Ranger" badges or colorful cloth patches.

Eat, Drink & Be Merry

After a busy day, you'll need a place to catch up on sleep. There are bed and breakfast inns, ranches, cottages, motels, a Pueblo-style inn (Indian Lodge, located in Davis Mountains State Park), and campgrounds. Tiffany Roman of the Chamber of Commerce recommends Prude Ranch for its horseback riding and indoor heated swimming pool.

The Hotel Limpia, established in 1884, anchors Town Square. Owners Joe and Lanna Duncan purchased the hotel in 1991, but it has been in the family off and on since 1953. The historic hotel is a popular lodging choice, and its dining room serves up elegant food reminiscent of old West Texas. Says Joe Duncan, "Our most popular entrée is the burgundy-marinated roast beef. Mashed potatoes and biscuits are also popular." Anyone who can't

Looking for more fun?

Try these places:

1. Rattlers & Reptiles—Squirm through the largest snake exhibit around
2. Limpia Creek Hat Company—Find out how a cowboy hat is made
3. Davis Mountain Nut Company—Go nutty over delicious pecans dipped in chocolate, cinnamon spice, and more