



THIS

LAND

IS



**PRIVATE LAND COMPRISES THE MAJORITY OF TEXAS.** NOW, TWO ONLINE PLATFORMS OFFER THE CHANCE TO GET IN TOUCH WITH NATURAL BEAUTY PREVIOUSLY INACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC.

**BY CLAYTON MAXWELL  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM MCCARTHY JR.**

YOUR

LAND

# I HAVE SIDESTEPPED PRICKLY PEAR



and creosote to crest a rugged overlook, and my rewards are an endorphin surge and the sight of the turquoise Devils River cleaving the canyon below. While standing on the rocky crag overlooking the Hudspeth River Ranch just north of Comstock, I consider the words of Henry David Thoreau: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” In wildness, I would add, is also the preservation of our sanity. For me, this ranch is a reprieve from a world grappling with a pandemic. Like the winds that carry the buzzards over the river canyon, the wildness here is a thermal uplift for the spirit.

I’ve booked a night at Hudspeth River Ranch via Explore Ranches, an online platform that offers guests overnight stays at

top-tier private ranches in Texas, California, Colorado, and New Mexico. This year, when so many are seeking the solace and freedom of the outdoors due to COVID-19, Explore Ranches has received nine times as many bookings as it did in 2019. Apparently, I’m not the only one craving a little wildness these days.

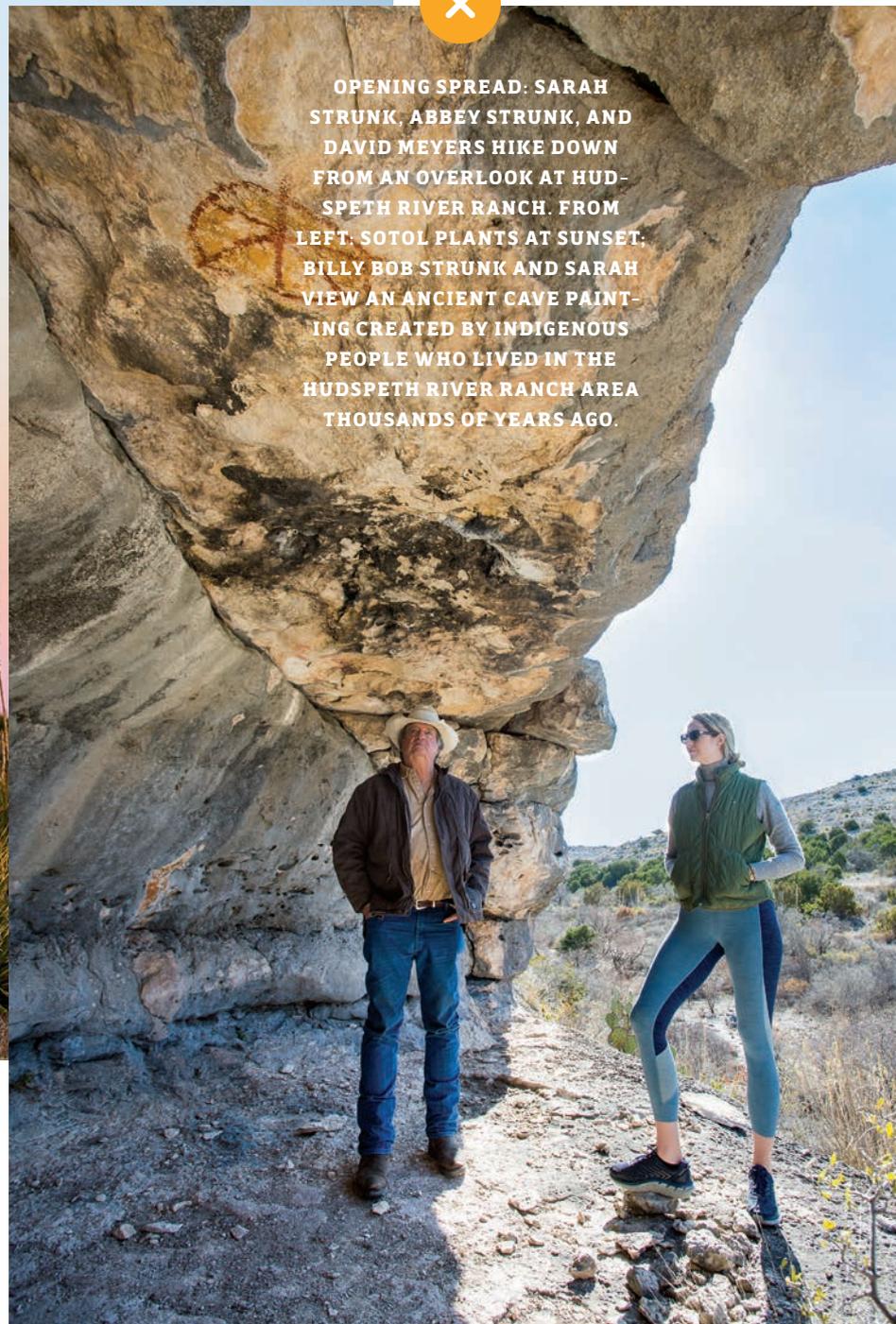
“The mental and physical benefits of just being outdoors for days without connection to our routines and electronics—that’s why we started the business,” says Jay Kleberg, who co-founded Explore Ranches in 2018 with Allison Ryan and Jesse Womack. “We want to give people the opportunity to create some kind of connection to the outdoors and clean air and water, so they fall in love with and want to conserve those places.”

Explore Ranches is on the front wave of a vacation trend called land sharing. The trend is similar to short-term vacation rental, which platforms like Airbnb and Vrbo excel at. Rather than staying in someone’s house in town, you escape to remote locales that sometimes even a GPS can’t find. Explore Ranches’ properties tend to run more expensive due to the size of the accommodations and the various optional amenities. Hipcamp is a good alternative platform for those seeking a more rough-hewn and economical trip. Launched in San Francisco in 2013, Hipcamp offers properties spanning the country, with 3,000 locations in Texas. The accommodations range from campsites and cabins to yurts and RV spots.



Once booked, the platform facilitates a connection with the landowner and handles details.

Both platforms offer options state and national parks can't provide in Texas, where 95.8% of the 268,000 square miles that make up our state is privately owned, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The rest is owned by local, state, and federal governments. It's a stark contrast to Western states with similarly vast terrain: In New Mexico, Arizona, and Wyoming, over 50% of land is government-owned. Unlike these other states, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management is almost non-existent in Texas. The only bureau property in Texas is the 12,000-acre Cross Bar Management Area in the Panhandle, which is being



**OPENING SPREAD: SARAH STRUNK, ABBEY STRUNK, AND DAVID MEYERS HIKE DOWN FROM AN OVERLOOK AT HUDSPETH RIVER RANCH. FROM LEFT: SOTOL PLANTS AT SUNSET; BILLY BOB STRUNK AND SARAH VIEW AN ANCIENT CAVE PAINTING CREATED BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN THE HUDSPETH RIVER RANCH AREA THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO.**

restored to its natural shortgrass prairie ecosystem and not currently open to the public. So much off-limits land makes “No Trespassing” signs ubiquitous, leaving outdoors enthusiasts imagining what lies beyond the barbed-wire fences that crisscross the countryside. “A far greater percentage of people in Texas don’t have an opportunity to be in a true wilderness

setting like in Western states,” says Mark Steinbach, executive director of Texas Land Conservancy, a nonprofit that helps landowners preserve the legacy of their land through conservation easements. “Sure, there’s access to city parks and to a lesser degree, the state parks, but those are more manicured.”

In a state with so little public space—and



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
THE STRUNKS' DOG BIRDIE  
STICKS HER HEAD OUT DURING  
A DRIVE AROUND THE RANCH;  
AN IRON SIGN WELCOMES  
VISITORS; SARAH (LEFT) AND  
ABBEY STRUNK HOST GUESTS  
AT THEIR HUDSPETH RIVER  
RANCH; HAMMOCKS HANG IN  
FRONT OF THE GUEST HOUSE.



where parks are particularly in demand during the pandemic—land sharing is a welcome new trend and one conservationists hope will also help preserve the land.

**As kids, Sarah and Abbey Strunk** sipped the waters that bubbled from the limestone creekbed on their family's Hudspeth River Ranch. They would scoop clear,

clean water into their palms and taste the tang of water lilies and the earthiness of moss. Today, they help run the ranch in West Texas where the waters of the Devils River—arguably the most pristine in Texas—first emerge.

During my overnight at the Hudspeth, I witness how the Strunk sisters have been shaped by their access to the remote land that's been in their family since 1905. They can easily maneuver a Suburban over

hair-raising low-water crossings, shoot an aoudad across a canyon at 300 yards, and catch and clean a 21-inch smallmouth bass. Now in their late 20s, they understand how fortunate they were to roam these 15,000 acres throughout their childhood. And they would like to share it in the most respectful, responsible way.

"I realize that my childhood experience is not the norm," Sarah says. "Unfortunately, such places are disappearing, and in order to preserve these treasures for future generations, we must share them with others. Sharing our place allows people to find a connection with the outdoors and hopefully want to keep them around." The Hudspeth, which can sleep 10 guests,



runs \$650 a night per adult, with kids staying for free.

Landowners have been leasing ranchland to hunters and outdoor sportsmen since the 1950s, and it's become an essential revenue stream. But Explore Ranches' model is different. It proffers a connection between owner and guest, one in which guests experience nature that is normally inaccessible, and owners generate income while educating and motivating others to help keep the land undeveloped.

Kleberg, Explore Ranches' co-owner, has a personal connection to this mission. A member of the King Ranch family, he comes from a long line of conservationists. In 1934, his great-grandfather, U.S. Congressman and rancher Richard Kleberg, authored the Federal Duck Stamp Law, which requires waterfowl hunters to purchase a stamp that now raises millions annually for wetland conservation. Kleberg is a former associate director for the Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation and is currently producing the first Hollywood-quality feature-length documentary about Texas' unique ecosystems called *Deep in the Heart, a Texas Wildlife Story*, due for release in 2022.

Kleberg says private landowners are often the best stewards of their land—if they can afford to keep it. He knows that when landowners are forced to sell, the resulting fragmentation can be

environmentally devastating, particularly for the animals that require undeveloped corridors of land to roam. If you want to protect Texas land, you need to collaborate with landowners.

“Landowners can have the greatest positive impact on the future of our open spaces, water, and wildlife,” Kleberg says. “And if Explore Ranches and other land-sharing platforms can create memorable outdoor moments for people, even if it's just looking at the Milky Way, those moments stay with the guests and multiply.”

I'm having my own memorable outdoor moment, bumping around in the Strunk sisters' scuffed-up ranch Suburban, their two eager border collies, Nellie and Birdie, scrambling from seat to seat. With their father, Billy Bob Strunk, we drive out to see the prehistoric rock art tucked away in the limestone bluffs at a far corner of the property. We also go to Alice's Wonderland, their mother Alice Ball Strunk's favorite swimming hole. Alice, a no-fuss lawyer with a fondness for Birkenstocks, manages the ranch's goat and lamb enterprise, a business she learned from her mother.

But the pièce de résistance of Hudspeth is Pecan Springs, the headwaters of the





FROM LEFT: AN  
AIRSTREAM CALLED  
"MOONBEAM" AND A  
VINTAGE "CANNED HAM"  
TRAILER ARE LODGING  
OPTIONS VIA HIPCAMP  
ON ROUND MOUNTAIN  
RANCH.



Devils River. It is a strangely emotional moment seeing where Texas' wildest river is born. Water gushes up from the dark aquifer below and catches light for the first time, shimmering and clear. About 45 miles from this spot, it will disappear into Amistad Reservoir near Del Rio, where it will meld into the Rio Grande and flow into the Gulf of Mexico.

The Strunk sisters tell me if the aquifer gets depleted, springs such as these could dry up. We talk about their mother, a board member for the Devils River Conservancy. She's currently fighting to keep a Chinese billionaire from installing a mammoth wind farm along the river, which threatens to make the waterway far less pristine.

Explore Ranches' aspiration to win recruits to land conservation has worked on me. I have a connection with this land now and the people who take care of it. Talking with the Strunks underscored the deep responsibility three generations have had for this land, and the dedication required to keep it healthy and wild.

**In contrast to the ultra-curated** and high-end Explore Ranches experience, Hipcamp is a more rugged and far more budget-friendly land-sharing platform. The online marketplace provides a spectrum of getaways: pitching a tent on a

Dripping Springs farm for \$20 a night or hiding away in a tepee near Granbury for \$48. Initially a website guide for campers, Hipcamp launched its land-sharing platform in 2013. It now offers a diverse menu of natural lodgings—on farms and vineyards, in treehouses and cabins—and in a reasonable price range. The company's key performance indicator is "nights outside;" currently, their users have spent more than 2 million nights under the stars.

Browsing [hipcamp.com](http://hipcamp.com) from my desk in the city is like flipping through a magical camping catalogue. It has so many possibilities that an urbanite's dream of sitting around a campfire or smelling petrichor from a tent after it rains is easily within reach. Alyssa Ravasio, Hipcamp's founder, believes mental health and time in nature go hand in hand.

"Getting outside is more important than ever," Ravasio explains. "I am a firm believer in biophilia—that getting outside is essential to human health and happiness—and science is really starting to back this up with research. Especially with all the extra pain and stress in the world right now, being outdoors can help people find rest and healing."

Sometimes an overnight getaway in a 2004 Airstream trailer called "Moonbeam" is all the rest and healing you need. I make a reservation with Michael Larson to stay at Round Mountain Ranch, located by



## WHERE TO STAY WITH EXPLORE RANCHES

Visit [exploreranches.com](http://exploreranches.com) for sample itineraries, available activities, and amenities for each property.

**Withers Ranch, Kent:** A hiker's paradise tucked away in the Davis Mountains, the ranch's 16,000 acres offer some of the most precipitous mountain views in Texas. A "hosted" experience at the two-bedroom home includes a landowner who will guide you and cook for you. \$650 per night, per adult (children under 12 stay for free), sleeps eight

**Rocker B Ranch, Graford:** With tennis courts, baseball diamonds, skeet shooting, and enough room to accommodate a small army, this ranch is ideal for a big family reunion. Nestled in the wilds of Palo Pinto Canyon, the Rocker B is one of Explore Ranches' "semi-hosted" experiences, which means guests are greeted by a landowner or landowner representative, and catered meals and guided excursions are available upon request. \$5,000 a night, sleeps 60

**Llano Spring Ranch, Junction:** With 3 miles of the Llano running through it, this ranch offers a river-centric experience that can include kayaking, paddleboarding, and a visit to the nearby Blue Hole. The Llano Springs Ranch is a "semi-hosted" experience. Guests can also learn about the ranch's award-winning efforts in sustainable land-management practices. \$1,200 a night, sleeps eight





## WHERE TO STAY WITH HIPCAMP

Visit [hipcamp.com](https://hipcamp.com) to see a full range of accommodations, additions, and activities.

**Boulderdash, Bandera:** With a cabin, five RV spots, and three tent sites, this small property on the Medina River offers the most coveted of qualities: river access. Because of its river views, Hipcamp users named Boulderdash RV Site No. 2 “Best Hipcamp Camping Spot in Texas” in 2019.

\$25–\$35 a night for tent sites, maximum of eight people per site; \$50 a night for RV sites, maximum of six people per site; \$165 a night for cabin, sleeps eight

**5D Ranch, Navasota:** This 400-acre ranch of woodlands and prairies offers 14 miles of trails for hiking, a pond and a lake for fishing, and 18 spacious campsites with fire pits. Turkeys, horses, hogs, miniature ponies, and other animals share the property. \$30 per campsite, maximum of 16 guests per site

**JH Ranch, Stephenville:** Hang out long enough on the porch of the rustic log cabin perched over a 6-acre lake, and you just might see a beaver. The simple but comfortable cabin, which sleeps five, has a kitchen and air conditioning. A paddleboat and kayaks are available to use for free, and a bass boat for serious lake fishing costs \$50 to rent. \$145 a night, sleeps five



the Balcones Canyonland Preserve near Leander. His 5 tree-covered acres include a tiny “canned ham” trailer, a cabin, several primitive campsites, and Moonbeam, my home for one beautiful night.

Much like the Strunks, Larson is motivated by love of the land. He lives in his own house on the property—although he keeps a low profile and doesn’t intrude on guests—and is a dedicated steward of it. Settling into Moonbeam, I note his care and attention to detail. The interior evokes a 1960s space pod, one that Larson has tricked out with custom *Jetsons*-style shelving, lilac sheets, kilim pillows, and a well-placed book of Leonard Cohen poetry on the writing desk. Everything has

a place, and all the essentials are included. The best part is watching the fireflies and rising moon from the ample outdoor deck.

“I’m only here for a while. This land will continue on,” says Larson, about his cedar- and oak-filled slice of earth where he has carved out hiking trails and a vernal pond. “We think something is ours, but in the big picture it’s not. My goal is just to leave this land better than I found it.” The way Larson talks about it, land sharing really does sound like the type of sharing you learn about in kindergarten. He has something I don’t, and thanks to this new platform, I can affordably enjoy it, too. The money he makes from Hipcamp, he reinvests in his land’s care.



Ravasio says Hipcamp, like Explore Ranches, has seen a surge of users since the onset of COVID-19, which has helped landowners stay economically afloat amid the pandemic's financial challenges. Landowners are making three times more on Hipcamp this year than they did last year, as more people are traveling close to home and seeking vacations with plenty of room to roam crowd-free. According to Ravasio, some of their most successful properties earned as much as \$100,000 in their first few months. Hipcamp recently launched "Extras," an option for guests

to add on experiential offerings like a chef-cooked meal with local ingredients, firewood for the perfect campfire, and even weddings.

Land sharing is a triple win: Guests get to experience previously off-limits wilderness, landowners and workers earn their livelihood from the land, and, if the land remains undeveloped, it's a win for the ecosystem that depends upon it. During a time when so many of our lives are isolated and unmoored, "nights outside" can aid the preservation of our well-being, and—just maybe—our world. 🌲



**MICHAEL LARSON'S  
HIPCAMP PROPERTY  
NEAR LEANDER OFFERS  
SEVERAL TYPES OF  
ACCOMMODATIONS,  
INCLUDING A CABIN,  
CAMPING AREA, AND  
AIRSTREAM.**

