

# THE BAD RABBIT OF TERLINGUA RANCH

BY SHANNON KING

This is the country they call life. A place where you can be yourself – unencumbered by city lights, concrete streets, and fashionistas. Where the coyote sits alone on the ridge surveying his domain, and the lion crosses in the dark – almost never seen. A place where tumbleweeds play on the highway because, well ... they ain't scared.

And I race down that highway, headlights against the setting sun, just to be there for a moment. To sink into there for an evening. To hold it tight as if it might walk away at any second.

Because you see it could, it really could.

But for now, even the bears have found their way back, trekking through the desert of Mexico – and she has her secrets this desert, hidden under layers of sand and rock. Thorns and brush. You cannot ask what her story is, you can only listen quietly, and maybe ... if you're lucky she will tell you, and if she tells you, you will be lost in it forever as I am.

As I sit tonight, outside Terlingua Ranch Lodge, a cool breeze rises, gently brushing the hair across my eyes. I push it back into place. The horse grazes nearby, a steady stream of molars grinding. The only other sound a symphony of crickets. Tonight the stars are shy, and the day doesn't want to go to bed, but it is time, and so the moon climbs slowly into the seat of these mountains and sits, waiting patiently. Watching me. And with a sip of wine I lean back in this rickety old camp chair – as has become my custom – and close my eyes. Anticipating. For in the morning we will ride the Christmas Mountains, an ascent of almost 2,000 feet in just under four miles.

The trail runs steep, so I put the horse forward at a trot and the dogs follow behind – tongues lolling. At the third switchback we halt and gaze down toward the lodge, but the horse is eager and turns to the west as if to move us along. As if he, too, wants to reach the top.

I have ridden myself into boldness before and that is where I make my mistakes, with a horse you must always remember. But I trust this horse. This is not his first mountain and he has learned to watch his feet. He knows when to run and when to walk – when to stop and enjoy the view. So we teeter along the edge of this trail, farther and farther away from any other sign of human life, and there is something magical in that. About knowing you're the only person in a broad expanse of nothingness. As if the world exists just for you, like some kind of unopened present on Christmas morning.

We follow the road from one end to another and into a hidden valley where catclaw and lechuguilla post a savage guard. There,



a bevy of quail takes flight and the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend tease from the south, winking seductively between valley walls and rolling hills. Now the dogs run ahead, stopping at each hint of shade to rest, and the horse moves slowly – worn from his climb.

And then, along jumbled rock we crest the final ridge and arrive at our destination, the Christmas Mountains Overlook, and the world changes. Colors bleed together in the distance, and what's hard appears soft. Desert becomes ocean, waves tumbling one over



the other. A bird screeches and I glance up to see a hawk, an eagle, or some other raptor circling, squawking his way around the peak above us. Warning us not to get too close.

Imagination runs deep here in this amalgam of desert asphalt and tumbling ridges – both legend and truth. Every range a dichotomy of history. Every individual unique.

Carroll Shelby, a Texas chicken farmer-turned-racecar driver and eventually car builder, was no different – racing into the desert of West Texas almost 60 years ago, looking for an escape and instead building a legacy. A coat of arms dedicated to the local jackrabbits and 1860 wagon races, fabricated from the mind of artist Bill Neale and a run of chili cook-offs and racing teams that continues today.

And Terlingua Ranch, now a sprawling semi-development of desert homes, tents and trailers, holds this memory close. Shelby's coat of arms stands proud on dusty truck bumpers, dirt roads, and land boundaries of this desert division.

It's easy to reflect here, high above the world below, and so I do – in this remote, yet intimate place. Browsing through the scars, the lines, and soft parts of myself which used to be hard. The hard parts which used to be soft. Through the cactus thorns and quicksand, the should haves and did nots. The words unspoken and only thought. It seems they hurt just the same, don't they?

It takes a certain kind of grit to make a living here – it always has. Most just visit. Water is scarce, resources are few, and off-grid is simply another way of life. The heat can kill – and at times it does – but those who make this desert their home have a way with it. A way they are willing to suffer for. A suffering which comes with great reward.



In a moment we will begin our descent, back into the land of to-do lists, traffic and hot meals – but for now we sit in our reverie. Dreaming and watching the earth move around us, spinning into the nothingness above as if it, too, wants to touch the sky and simply melt into the blue. Each breath a slow exhale.

When it's time, I slide my foot into the stirrup, mount and pull the reins around. I am hot, sweaty, and covered in dirt, yet my thoughts rest. They have found their balance, stirred only by the wind, stoked only by the sound of hoof-steps, and my heart opens. And once again I am lost in this world.

For what can you feel here but small?

Entry to the Christmas Mountains is by permit only, available at Terlingua Ranch Lodge along with cabins and camping facilities. ■