



MAGICAL MYSTERY LIGHTS

A JOURNEY TO WEST TEXAS IN SEARCH OF UNCERTAINTY AND WONDER

Story by Frank Bures 📍 Photographs by Jennifer Boomer

A few miles outside of Marfa, there's famously a Prada store, which is not a store at all but an art installation. At a glance, it's hard to tell if it is real, as with many things in the small town. But I'd come to West Texas to look for the town's other hard-to-define claim to fame, the so-called Marfa Lights. Depending on who you ask, these balls of light that sometimes appear after sundown on the horizon or even closer may be swamp gas, earthlights, ball lightning, plasma, aliens, evil spirits, good spirits, or, to skeptics, simply car headlights on the horizon.

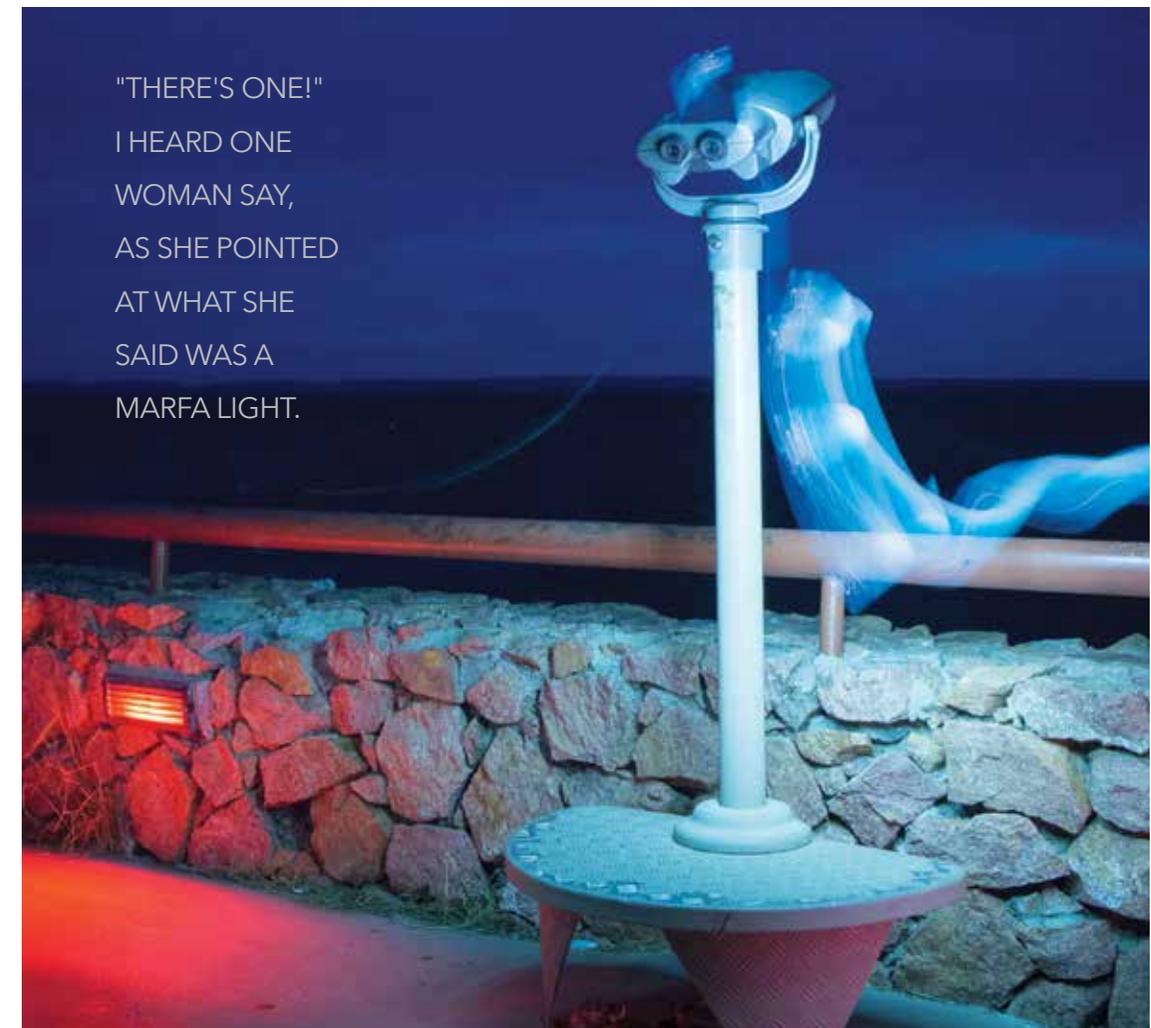
No one has proved any of these theories. Even James Bunnell, an aerospace engineer who grew up in Marfa and spent 12 years researching, photographing, and measuring the lights from 2000 to 2012, couldn't reach a definitive conclusion.

Still, the Marfa Lights called to me. They were a mystery—a real one—that I might be able to see for myself. In these days when there seems to be so much certainty around us, I wanted to be part of something uncertain. I wanted a reminder of how small we really are in this large universe.

I pulled into Marfa late in the afternoon. At the town's one stoplight, I turned right and drove

out to El Cosmico, a kind of hipster/backpacker campground/hotel where you can buy a \$30 bottle-opener set in the gift shop, along with a copy of the book, ... *Flying Saucers Are Real!*

It was Labor Day weekend and time for the annual Marfa Lights Festival, so all the hotels in town were booked, and I had to camp. I pitched my tent, and after dark I drove back to the stoplight, turned right, and headed 9 miles east to the Marfa Lights Viewing Center, which was built in 2003 at the roadside spot where locals had been stopping for years. I parked and walked around the curved path to the viewing platform. In the dark, I could



Marfa Lights Viewing Center

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OF COURSE,
NO WAY TO
VERIFY THIS.

see the outlines of about 20 people standing in small groups, speaking in whispers. A cool night breeze washed across Mitchell Flat, home of the lights. I sat on a bench and looked up at a sky full of stars.

"There's one!" I heard one woman say, as she pointed at what she said was a Marfa Light. It appeared to be a car making a slow downward journey on what I was pretty sure was Highway 67. Beyond, I saw only lightning flashes. But it was peaceful sitting quietly with a bunch of strangers, waiting for the universe to unveil itself.

The next day, I stopped at the Visit Marfa tourism office to inquire about the best place to see the Marfa Lights. I was told about a man named Mike Shurley, who had the best view of them from his ranch, and another named Kim Thornsburg, who gives Marfa Lights tours.

Thornsburg lived in town, so I called him first. He's a model-ship builder and an aficionado of, let's say, alternative histories. He welcomed me into his museum and told me his story, which began when he was 14 years old and first got his driver's license and went to see the Marfa Lights. "I was going to drive out there," he said, "to the farthest east spot, to park the car, jump the fence, and start walking. But I didn't get very far when one of those lights came up maybe 50 yards away. It was huge. It was bigger than our courthouse. I

couldn't move a single muscle. Then the smaller ones came out, many colored, and flew all around and went right back inside the big one. Then, it went right back down in the ground. I turned around, got in my car, and never went back out there again."

Thornsburg moved away for many years, but recently he came home. He wrote a booklet about the Marfa Lights and the Marfa Army Airfield, which was located at Mitchell Flat during World War II. He writes about an operations officer who claimed that almost every bomber that took off from the airfield was followed by a Marfa Light up into the sky. That, he said, is why the airfield was shut down.

There is, of course, no way to verify this. But Thornsburg wasn't the only person I talked to with strange stories about the lights. After asking around, I was sent to see Belle Peña-Lancaster in Alpine, where she works in sales and marketing for a mining company. She told me how in the eighth grade, in 1993, her basketball team was returning from a tournament when the bus pulled over so the players could see the lights. "We saw some lights off in the distance," she said. "And then they started coming up closer. They were kind of pastel colored. Blue, green, yellow, maybe a pink or reddish one. They looked like they were playing with each other in the distance.



Art installation
outside a Marfa
building

HISTORY IS FULL
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CAPTAIN MANUEL
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"THE LIGHTS
OF GOD."

They kept coming closer and closer."

Soon the lights came all the way to the window, lit up the bus, then shot out the other side across the field.

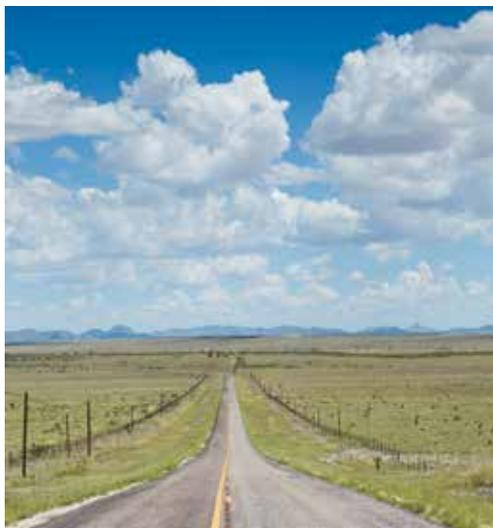
"We were all freaked out," she said. "The whole bus got quiet, and the lights shot off and went way off. And I was like, 'Oh, cool, they're going to do it again!' And sure enough they came closer and closer, kind of intermingling, playing with each other, then came up to the bus, lit up the inside, and shot out the other side. Some of the girls started crying and were

pretty upset, and I was like 'Oh, God, they're going to do it again!' And our coach told the bus driver, 'Go, go, go, go!'"

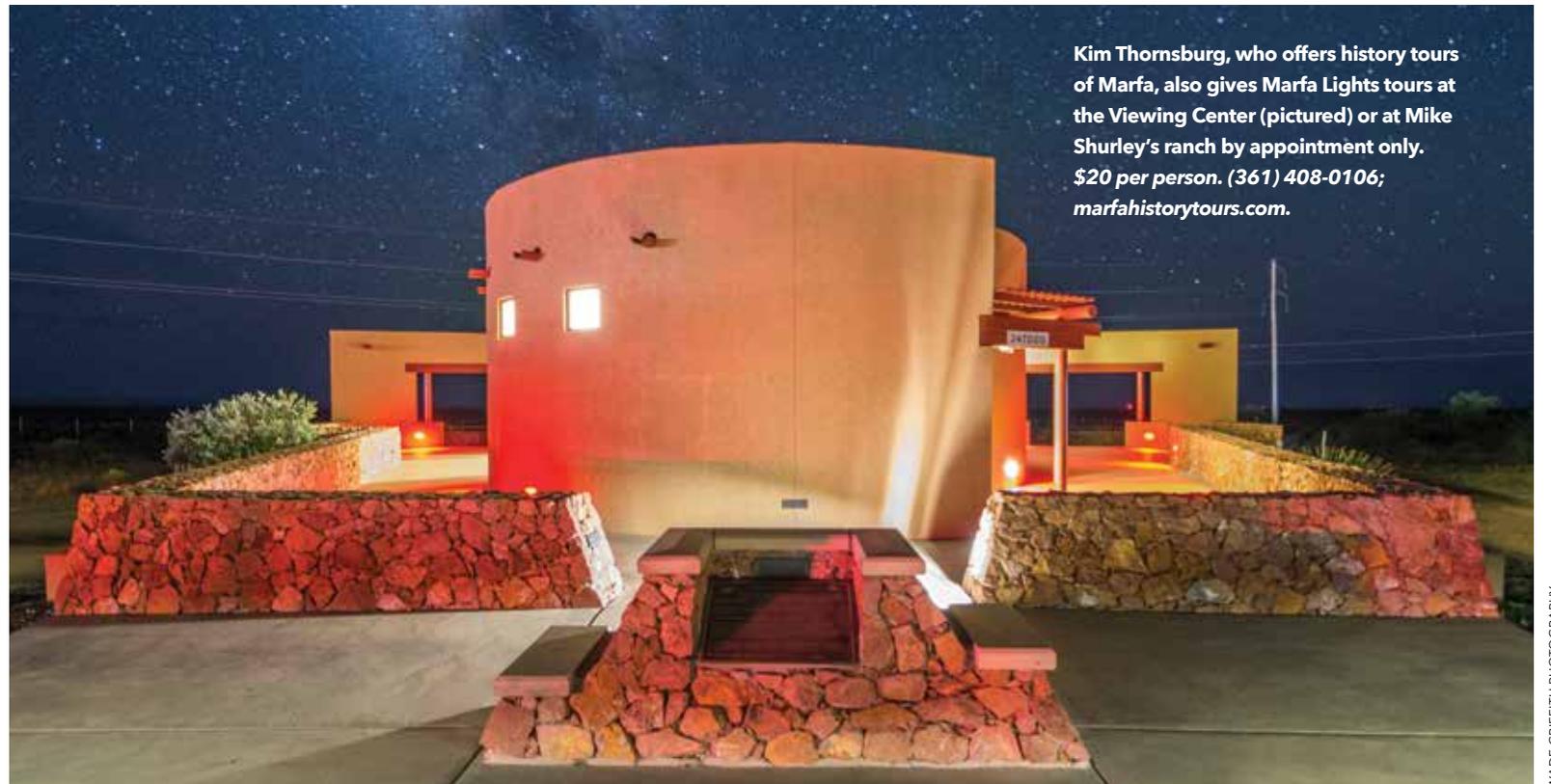
Peña-Lancaster's account was vivid and strange, but it had much in common with other people's stories, including that of Kendra DuBois, a trained archaeologist who grew up on a ranch just across the road from the Marfa Lights Viewing Center. "I graduated from high school in 1998," she told me at an Alpine coffee shop, "so from 1994 to 1998 my friends and I spent a lot of time parked on

IF YOU GO

To get to the Marfa Lights Viewing Center from Marfa, head east on Highway 90/67 toward Alpine for 9 miles. It's open 24 hours, and free of charge. For your best chance of seeing the lights, visit during a new moon to ensure a dark sky. visitmarfa.com/lights.



KIM THORNSBURG



Kim Thornsburg, who offers history tours of Marfa, also gives Marfa Lights tours at the Viewing Center (pictured) or at Mike Shurley's ranch by appointment only. \$20 per person. (361) 408-0106; marfahistorytours.com.

WADE GRIFFITH PHOTOGRAPHY



BELLE PEÑA-LANCASTER

“WE WERE ALL FREAKED OUT. THE WHOLE BUS GOT QUIET, AND THE LIGHTS SHOT OFF AND WENT WAY OFF.”

the side of the road there, hanging out. And it seemed like if there were lots of people, and the people were excited, the lights would be more active. Like if they got a reaction, they would keep moving or jumping up and down, or twirl off into the distance.”

Yet one of the strangest stories I heard came from Mona Blocker Garcia, a retired interior designer who lives in Marfa. In 2009, she had a very close encounter with the Marfa Lights with her son, Greg, who died of leukemia the following year.

“It was about 9:30 at night,” she told me when I stopped by her house. “There must have been 300 or 400 people out on that viewing platform. Straight out, I saw a glow on the desert floor.

And I said ‘Greg, do you see that?’ And he said, ‘Yes. I’ve never seen that before.’ Then it became a ball of light, and started spiraling toward the Viewing Center, really fast. People were running and screaming and falling down trying to get out of there. I jumped behind my son, and put my arms around his waist. The light came right up to the front of the Viewing Center, and broke into a million white lights, like sparklers on the Fourth of July. Just big flashes of white lights all around us. Then it was gone. Nothing. It was terrifying.”

Were these light shows deliberate? Were the lights interacting with people? Or is that just our way of making sense of something incomprehensible? Most people I talked to who’d had up-close interactions felt as though there was some intention behind the lights. But no one could say what that intention might be.

“They’re intelligent,” said Thornsburg. “Bunnell and those guys will disagree 100 percent. They still think it’s gas. But how can gas follow me on a highway through the mountains, stay on the road, then see me walking back and take off? How do they do that?”

The simple explanations—car lights, drones, mirages, illegal border crossers—all fall short in scope. After all, history is full of Marfa Lights sightings, dating back to 1617, when Captain Manuel Pedro Vasco first called them “The Lights of God.” The scientific explanations are helpful but incomplete. Bunnell, who suspects the lights are a form of plasma, found that the Marfa Lights are unaffected by the strong winds that cross Mitchell Flat. He thinks they’re related to magnetic disturbances. Meanwhile, the supernatural explanations—ghosts, spirits, UFOs, earth-dwelling beings—remain a speculative abyss into which it’s too easy to fall.

That evening, I drove up to Mike Shurley’s ranch. He grew up here but spent years working in South America in the oil and gas industry. Like his childhood friend Thornsburg, he moved back a few years ago. He took over his family ranch, which is now known as Marfa Haus, with rooms and houses for rent. As a science-minded person, he wants to better understand the phenomenon. “They come up out of the ground like a plasma,” Shurley said. “But they have behavior. It’s not like the northern lights, which are a function of the intensity of the sun hitting our magnetic atmosphere. When I talk about what they are, I lay both sides out. And I cannot marry them. I have no way to put what I know on one side, and what I know on the other side, and make that be one thing.”

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After dark, we drove up the hill to his viewing area. Shurley took some folding chairs out of his truck and we sat facing Mitchell Flat. Again, the stars were bright, the Milky Way was full, and the crickets sang all around us. A few minutes passed. "Okay," he said, "see the blinking light, and to the right? There's a light. See it? There's a car light on the right, but that in the middle is a Marfa Light. It's real dim. It's fluttering. And now it's gone."

I strained my eyes in the dark. I didn't see it.



MIKE SHURLEY

"JUST PICK A SPOT AND START WATCHING WITH YOUR PERIPHERAL VISION. YOU'LL SEE A FLICKER, LIKE A SPARKLER 300 OR 400 YARDS AWAY."

"When they come up, they can be anywhere in that area," he said. "Just pick a spot and start watching with your peripheral vision. You'll see a flicker, like a sparkler 300 or 400 yards away."

We waited and watched.

"Now, see the light to the right at the bottom of the telephone pole? It's pulsing and going back and forth. That's probably 10 miles from where they normally come up."

I could see it, barely: a tiny prick of light that shone and vanished.

"Okay, there's one, real bright, and it's moving. See it?"

"Yes!" I saw it clearly.

The light came and went. Others followed, some dim, some brighter. They were far off, and less spectacular than I'd hoped. I didn't find anything menacing about them. But still, there they were!

After an hour or so, we noticed a glow in the trees down the hill from us.

"You see that?" Shurley asked.

I did.

"I wonder if that's my wife coming up to tell me something?"

We waited, but no car appeared, and we couldn't hear an engine. The light vanished.

"So that's not your wife?" I asked.

"No," he said, sounding alarmed. "I have no explanation for that. I don't want to weird you out, but that's never happened. Okay, see down there farther to the left? How did it move back that far that fast?"

We got in the truck, turned off the lights, and drove down the hill to look for the light source. But when we got there, it was gone. We went back up to the viewing area.

Sitting in our chairs, we saw a few more Marfa Lights. The night grew late, and we were looking at the stars, when something below Cassiopeia flashed bright white, then went out, then flashed again two more times. "That's what we saw last time," Shurley said, "except it flashed real bright, then moved to the east. Well, you've seen just about everything now!"

I was pretty sure I hadn't seen everything. But I'd seen more than I hoped to. I'd seen things that I couldn't explain. I'd seen things that made my world feel a little bigger. And when I drove down to Marfa that night, it was under a sky filled with mysteries.

Frank Bures is an award-winning travel writer and the author of *The Geography of Madness*, a book about culture-bound syndromes.

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