

A Trip Back In Time

Riding New Mexico

Clayton R. Douglas

There are states that are more sparsely populated, but they are too far north to even consider touring comfortably in winter. There are states that are warmer but are so densely populated as to turn a day trip into a fight for survival on the freeways.

New Mexico is just a day's ride from Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado, has no helmet law and is like taking a trip back in time.

Much of the Southwest was like this in the forties and fifties, but progress turned the cow towns into bustling metropolises like Dallas, OKC and Phoenix. The cowboys took to riding pickups and mechanical bulls and a cosmopolitan air engulfed those once rugged frontiers.

Somewhere along the rush into the twenty first century, New Mexico, luckily for us, was left behind.

Leaving Phoenix on for a weeklong tour of New Mexico, we headed for the mountains and Payson for a gradual acclimatization to the high country of New Mexico. Bring your leathers and your long under wear. Dress in layers. If you are doing this in the winter, you will find that the days are warm and the nights, very, very cold.

The traffic was heavy between Phoenix and Payson. It stayed that way following Highway 60 until we got past Snowflake, where it began to thin. Plenty of gas stations to choose from in Payson and Snowflake, but be sure to top off your tank when you reach Springerville. You are about to enter a desolate but beautiful land. From here on out, if you see an open gas station, no matter what it looks like, fill up, especially if you are riding late into the evening.

If you took your time, or left late, it might be a good idea to spend the night in this neighborhood. There are several motels in Springerville. You may not be so lucky further down the line. If you've packed a picnic lunch, or are planning on camping out under the stars, there is an ideal rest area (no facilities) just inside the New Mexico border, and another campground on the west side of Datil.

Highway 60 is a good alternate to Interstate 40 further to the north. Once you cross the border of New Mexico, you may feel like you have crossed the barrier of time to a day when seeing an automobile was a rare sight. While the cars may be modern, they are far and few in between.

Traffic being the least of your worries for the next few days, you can relax and enjoy the road itself, and the magnificent scenery around you. New Mexico is high country, most of it over a mile high.

The small towns you will pass through on this route are Quemado, Pie Town, Datil and Magdalena. As long as you don't pass this way too late, (Remember most of the folks who have businesses along this route are country folk and are early risers and go to bed shortly after sunset) you can find a quaint, charming café with good, simple food and friendly folk. You city riders may have to go hungry if you are looking for a Dennys. There isn't one until you get to Socorro.

Don't let the run down appearance of the buildings put you off. There won't be anything that resembles a 7-11 or Circle K or any other sort of franchise for miles. By the time you get to Datil, you start to understand that New Mexicans like their old familiar buildings. Sprucing up the place just pads the bankers' billfolds. The towns are rustic and seemingly empty. Fact is, most of the "residents" live far off the main road and outside the town.

Once inside New Mexico, you are in Catron County. It is known for its reverence for the Constitution and resistance to any forms the federal government might take. Of late, there has been a great influx of out of state people into this county. Land sales are booming, as evidenced by the better condition of the buildings and signs of the real estate offices. More and more people, tired of the cities back East and the government interference in their lives, are migrating here. Catron County is also famous for its elk, which outnumber the people by a good margin. Another reason NOT to ride at night.

If you rode at night, it would be hard to appreciate the VLA (Very Large Array). This is the place made famous by Jodie Foster in the sci-fi thriller "Contact". This radio telescope consists of twenty-four or more, four story tracking dishes that are moved around by rail to search the skies for signs of intelligent life. Take some time to investigate this high tech project.

The next town east is Magdalena. There are a few mines and a ghost town called Kelly just a short ride from town. There are several restaurants and even a convenience store. It may be getting late in the evening by now and you might want to go the next twenty miles into Socorro. Socorro means, "help" in

Spanish. It was called that because of the aid given to weary travelers along the Rio Grande's "Camino Real". This was the main thoroughfare between Mexico City and Sante Fe.

Today, Socorro is as close to a big city as you will see before Albuquerque. There are plenty of motels, restaurants, hardware and grocery stores. Restock your supplies, replace any bolts that have vibrated loose, get a good night's sleep and get up early for the next leg of your journey.

You Dennis lovers can get your Grand Slam here before checking out the "Bosque Del Apache". Go south out of Socorro, either on Interstate 25 or cut off just before the freeway to go south on NM Highway 1. Either way, 10 miles south, you will come to US Highway 380 at San Antonio. Go south at the flashing yellow light to the Bosque. Even if you are not normally bird watchers, the dense flocks of water birds nesting on the marshy banks of the Rio Grande are a spectacle worth seeing. After rubbing wings with our feathered friends, and depending on how long you've dallied, you can either enjoy a burger at the Owl Café or Manny's Burgers in San Antonio. Check out the little gas station and convenience store. Remember to top off at every chance. The next leg is 63 miles before you see a gas station again. You may want to taste the excellent homemade fudge at the counter there.

Pushing westward along US Highway 380, you will encounter a few residences. You will pass the entrance to Stallion Range, the North end of White Sands Missile Range. If you have planned your trip to put you here on the first Saturday of April or October, you will turn right here and be allowed to visit the Trinity Site, where the first Atomic Bomb was exploded. The gates open to the public only those two days. The rest of the year, the closest you can get is by stopping off in Bingham, NM.

Bingham is the closest town to the Trinity Site. At the General Store, you can get see photos and pick up a souvenir mug or T-shirt. This little store is also the home of this magazine and the Free American Newsmagazine. Between trips, it is home to this writer also. Across the street, at the Rock Shop, you can buy samples of Trinitite, the slightly radioactive glass created by the blast, along with millions of other rocks and minerals. If you are into rock collecting, there are mines back off the road and tours available.

You won't spend too much time in Bingham. You've seen it all. If you are a hunter, you will have noticed the herds of antelope grazing alongside the roads by now. There are also deer in the mountains, close to the mines, elk to the north, cattle galore and an occasional sighting of a beast called an oryx. Imported from Africa, this relative of the deer boasts straight, four-foot horns. It has an attitude, so don't expect it to run away from you, should you see one standing in the middle of the road. Come back and camp here next hunting season.

Just before you get into Carrizozo, you will see massive formations of lava rock. Welcome to the Valley of Fire. There is camping and picnic tables here. A ranger station will give you more information on this geological wonder. Imagine what this must have looked like as the molten lava filled the entire valley as it rolled slowly south. Down the way, miles to the South, is the only place on earth where natural black meets natural white where the lava meets the sparkling white sands of White Sands National Monument. You will have the opportunity to see Whites Sands and more down in Alamogordo, if you choose to go that way tomorrow. But for today, we are going to take the high road.

Carrizozo is a good place to fill up once more. If you want to see more wildlife, guns and antiques, all while eating the best burgers or chopped steak in New Mexico, check out the Outpost Bar and Grill just a few blocks south on Highway 54 or Carrizozo's main drag.

Hop back on Highway 380. There are even more historic towns down the way. You are now in Lincoln County, home of Billy the Kid and Smokey the Bear. You can learn more about both in Capitan and Lincoln. When you have tired of Lincoln, double back to Capitan and follow the road up to Ruidosa or continue on to Tinnie and cut back up to Ruidosa.

Ruidoso has skiing, gambling, fine restaurants and scores of beautiful shops. In September there is a run here, so the town is biker friendly. You have lodges, cabins and motels galore to choose from. Stay here a night or a week. You will notice a large amount of Texas license plates here. This will account for the ambiance of Ruidoso. This is the nearest ski resort to Texas and the Texans consider it to be *their* town.

Here you can make your choice on which way you want to go back. South takes you through Alamogordo, Las Cruces, and down I-10 to Tucson and Phoenix with side trips to Tombstone and Bisbee. Or you can go back to Carrizozo and highway 54 and take the back roads up to Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Along those roads, you can see the ancient Gran Quivara ruins from the days of the Spanish conquest of New Mexico and walk through the church and homes built by the Indians. North of Gran Quivera you will pass through Mountaineer. Catch Highway 14 north for a great winding road all the way up to I-40.

Highway 14 bypasses Albuquerque and runs on up to the old coal mining town of Madrid. The restaurant and bar there is a big attraction to local bikers. From there it is a short hop up to Santa Fe then an hour back to Albuquerque via I-25.

Albuquerque has plenty of Harley shops, Chick's H-D, Bikers Dream and Easyriders, just to name a few. Albuquerque is the biggest city in New Mexico but still has a lot of local charm. From there, it is wide-open highways or more of the back roads to get you back to Arizona.

After a week or two of Arizona traffic, you will look longingly back on this ride. Did you keep the card of the Real Estate guy in Datil?