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ALL TRAVEL, ALL THE TIME | May-June 2011

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

TRAVELER



Volcano views: Walk the one-mile Crater Rim Trail to get up close to Capulin Volcano.

ROAD TRIP

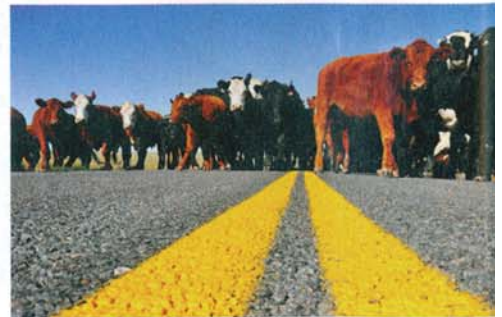
The Authentic Old West

A drive through scenic northeastern New Mexico recalls the pioneer lifestyle along the Santa Fe Trail. | By KATE SIBER

THERE ARE FEW PLACES where the Old West remains free from the T-shirt stores and other detritus of modern-day tourism, but northeastern New Mexico is one of them. A harsh, starkly beautiful landscape marked by prairies, volcanoes, pioneer homesteads, and villages straight out of a Western movie set, this is where cowboys walk the streets and artists weary of tourist towns like Santa Fe move to for peace and inspiration. The landscape has changed little since settlers, miners, and railroad workers passed through on the Santa Fe Trail, and a 400-mile driving route looping east from Taos makes a classic American road trip. Here, empty desert highways stretch to the horizon, views sprawl across the plains and Rockies, and ghost towns serve as poetic reminders of the country's not so distant frontier past.

SANTA FE TRAIL From Taos, wind 55 miles east along NM 64 as it drops through deep gorges of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the edge of the plains and the village of Cimarron, just outside Philmont Scout Ranch, the country's largest Boy Scout high adventure base. The

sleepy town itself was once a hub on the mountain branch of the Santa Fe Trail. More than a dozen historic buildings survive, including an old stone jail, courthouse, and gristmill, and local shops stock free historic walking tour maps. Don't miss the St. James Hotel (from \$70), once a wild hangout for unruly cowboys, outlaws, and lawmen. Characters like Jesse James and Wyatt Earp slept in the Victorian-era rooms, which are now refurbished with period wallpaper and four-poster beds. On the other side of town, several art galleries have moved into the Western-style storefronts. Peruse ceramics and Zuni jewelry at Blue Moon Eclectics, then



Cows along a highway near Johnson Mesa.

ISAAC CODDILL (LOWER LEFT); LEFT: HARRNESS; (UPPER); TIM WELLS (LOWER RIGHT)



Trade route: Wagon wheel ruts trace the Santa Fe Trail at Fort Union. Enjoy soda fountain treats at the Cimarron Art Gallery (far right). A scale (right) at the Folsom Museum harkens back to the building's days as the Doherty Mercantile Co.



RAILROAD BOOMTOWN As NM 64 pushes 40 miles east to Raton, the mountains peter out into the high plains but not without some fanfare: Dark rock formations rise out of pastures where cattle, buffalo, and pronghorn graze. Raton, once a flourishing railroad town along the Santa Fe Trail, hasn't changed much in

the past century. Walk around the historic district, where locals have refurbished two old theaters. Collectors sell antiques from historic storefronts, and an art gallery moved into the 1910 Wells Fargo Express building. For good Mexican food, head to Sands Restaurant, a dive diner.

COAL-MINING GHOST TOWN Sugarite Canyon State Park, six miles north of Raton on NM 72 and 526, protects the remains of a 1912 coal-mining town once inhabited by hundreds of fortune-seeking immigrants. A trail with signs leads past the old stone post office and weed-choked ruins of a school, shops, and homes—all a testament to how quickly a working town could go bust in the Old West. Nearby, stroll through wildflowers and up onto a mesa for views over the canyon on some of the park's 14-plus miles of hiking trails, then picnic on the shore of Lake Maloya.

PREHISTORIC DISCOVERIES Drive 36 miles east on 72 over the sprawling Johnson Mesa and past a pioneer church, old homesteads, and views of the Rocky Mountains. Folsom, a loose collection of ranches and abandoned storefronts, is more famous than it looks: In 1908, a

wander next door for a root beer float at the Cimarron Art Gallery, which doubles as a soda fountain, originally installed in 1937 for visiting Boy Scouts.

local ranch hand discovered ancient bison bones and man-made projectiles that helped archaeologists prove humans walked the continent some 10,000 years ago, far earlier than previously thought. The Folsom Museum, housed in an 1896 merchant building, exhibits historical memorabilia, such as notes by the archaeologists and replicas of the stone tools.

VOLCANO VIEWS Drive nine miles south on NM 325 to reach Capulin Volcano National Monument, one of the nation's best preserved cinder cone volcanoes. A trail leads around the rim of the crater and offers views over the 8,000-square-mile Raton-Clayton volcano field, dotted with craters and hardened lava flows. On a clear day, visitors can see four states from the tallest point on the rim.

DINOSAUR TRACKS Backtrack up 325, then take NM 456 east through mesas, canyons, and valleys frequented by elk and bear, then turn right on NM 370 to Clayton Lake State Park. A half-mile path



leads to a trove of dinosaur tracks with about 500 footprints from some six species. The low light of late afternoon is the best time to see the 100-million-year-old outlines of their toes.

CAVALRY FORT Traveling 150 miles southwest along 370, 412/56, and I-25, drivers see the Rockies as pioneers would have seen them—with no modern intrusions. Along the way to Fort Union, stop to see the Eklund Hotel in Clayton and the

Santa Fe Trail Museum in Springer; both are sleepy farm towns spattered with historic buildings. Fort Union was first established in 1851 as a garrison for soldiers defending the Santa Fe Trail from Indian attacks. Today, visitors can see the fort's adobe ruins and the largest visible network of ruts from the famed wagon route.

COLONIAL CITY Las Vegas, about 30 miles south on I-25, rivaled Denver in size and prestige in the mid-1800s. Founded in 1835, it was the last Spanish colony to be formed in North America. Over the years it became a stop on the Santa Fe Trail, a railroad boomtown, and movie set for silent filmmakers. A long depression helped save downtown's historic architecture from renovation, and now some 900 buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Walk around the plaza and Bridge Street to view examples of mid-19th-century adobes and Italianate Victorian storefronts. Estella's Café serves classic New Mexican fare like chiles rellenos. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: GEORGE H. HUEY; KATE SIBER; TIM KELLER