



The High Road to Taos

Laurie Frantz

Click to view Area attractions and map in new window.

The High Road to Taos Scenic Byway takes the traveler through an authentic remnant of Old Spain, still evident in the religion, architecture, topography, history, and people along the route. To begin this miraculous journey, take U.S.285/84 north from Santa Fe and turn east on N.M.503 to the Pueblo of Nambe. Occupied since about 1300, this Tewa pueblo was first described by Castano de Sosa in 1591 as a square structure, two stories high with a central plaza.

The byway turns north on N.M. 520, traveling through Chimayo, a community known for its fine Spanish weaving and crafts, good food, and famous church. The beautiful Santuario de Chimayo is especially known for El Posito, a hole in the floor of a side chapel filled with healing earth. Pilgrims come here to take a bit of the earth and pray for healing. The walls of an adjoining chapel are covered with religious paintings and statues, crosses, rosaries, and crutches left by those who have been healed. At the Easter season, the road to Chimayo is filled with people who have walked many miles in their various journeys. The village was founded in the early eighteenth century around a defensible plaza and its and still retains that pattern.

The byway next follows N.M. 76, climbing northeast through the creased and crinkled badlands, polka-dotted with scrubby pinon and juniper, with the Jemez Mountains enormous on the horizon. A slight detour takes you through Cordova, its dwellings sprawled along a narrow road which winds through a valley. The village is noted for its traditional wood carvers.

At Truchas, the byway makes a turn towards other destinations, but to truly appreciate its beauty, drive farther east into the village. The road through the village runs alongside a deep canyon. Buildings may seem to be precariously placed on its rim, but some of them have been there for generations. Looking east, you have the illusion of being on top of the world, but you're brought back to reality when you look west to the Truchas Peaks rising 5,600 feet above the village. This frontier outpost was built in a square with an entrance just wide enough for one cart to pass through, for defensive purposes.

Heading towards the village of Las Trampas, a wide expanse of valley opens out in panoramic beauty, the barren Truchas Peaks punctuating the eastern horizon. Over 13,000 feet in elevation, the Peaks are among the highest in the New Mexico Rockies. Settled in 1751, the village of Las Trampas has one of the finest surviving eighteenth-century churches in New Mexico, San Jose de Gracia, built in 1760 (open Friday, Saturday, and Sunday). All of the church's original paintings have survived.

Take a short detour at the junction of N.M. 76 and 75; the entrance to Picuris Pueblo is one-half mile to the north. Its church, the third built at this pueblo, dates from the 1770s. It is unadorned adobe, except for small plants growing on top of the buttresses and a pueblo ladder leaning against a wall. After visiting Picuris, turn back south on N.M. 75 through Penasco to N.M. 518. Turning north here, a pullout (milepost 51.5) overlooks the pastoral beauty of Placita and the valley that shelters it. Farther down the road, a pullout on U.S. Hill (milepost 61.2) provides a view of the Carson Forest in all its grandeur. The Taos Mountains dominate the view, with Wheeler Peak (at 13,161' New Mexico's highest) towering over them all.

On down the road is the Carson National Forest's Pot Creek Cultural Site (milepost 66.4). The gate to the parking lot is locked to prevent pot hunting; however, you can park on the road

and walk up. A one-mile loop trail leads to a kiva and a reproduction of a pueblo room. Signs along the trail interpret the lifestyle of the prehistoric inhabitants of the area.

Cruise on through the villages of Talpa and Ranchos de Taos. An old Spanish cemetery (campo santo, or holy field) brightens the view with flowers of every hue and crosses of every description among the traditional low marble gravestones.

What better way to end the trip than at the Saint Francis Plaza in Ranchos de Taos? Saint Francis welcomes you, his bronze arms lifted toward heaven. The church named for him is the focal point of the plaza. The San Francisco de Asis Church was made famous by the many artists and photographers who have tried to capture the essence of its massive adobe walls, glistening with straw. The interior is austere in its simplicity. Whitewashed walls contrast with dark-stained vigas and the Christmas colors of the reredos behind the altar. Instead of stained glass, two plain glass windows illuminate it from either side.

The church shares the plaza with private homes and Andy's La Fiesta saloon. Recently renovated shops and galleries alternate with collapsing adobe structures. A purple coyote fence coexists with more traditional turquoise window frames. Red roofs, red ristras, rancho music blaring from a boom box - these are some of the remembrances you will take home from the High Road to Taos.