



Enchanted Circle Scenic Byway

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The Enchanted Circle Scenic Byway has a taste of everything that's New Mexico. It links the oldest continuously occupied residence in New Mexico, Taos Pueblo, with Angel Fire, which was incorporated in 1986. It is home to the United States' first memorial to Vietnam War veterans. It passes by Elizabethtown, New Mexico's first incorporated town, now a ghost town. Much of the Byway traverses land formerly part of the Maxwell Land Grant, once the largest private individual holding in the western hemisphere. The movie industry discovered this area long ago, producing such films as "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and "Easy Rider".

The Byway begins in Taos on NM 522. The first to call the Taos Valley home were Tiwa-speaking Pueblo Indians, who settled there about 1000 years ago and built two communal dwellings on either side of the Rio Pueblo. Taos Pueblo's beautiful multi-story skyline was already there when Hernan de Alvarado arrived in 1540. The upper stories are only reached by ladders, since there are no interior stairways. Modern utilities are prohibited in this part of the pueblo.

Taos was established about 1615 as an outpost of New Spain. It was an early gathering place for mountain men, including Kit Carson and Ceran St. Vrain. Taos has been an artists' haven ever since the Taos Society of Artists was formed in 1914. Later, art patron Mabel Dodge Lujan brought noted artists and authors like D.H. Lawrence, Georgia O'Keeffe, Nicolai Fechin, and Ansel Adams. The town is a treasure trove of old homes, museums, interesting shops, and art galleries.

The Rio Grande Gorge bridge, twelve miles northwest of Taos on US 64, is a must-see side trip. When it was built in the mid-60s, it was called the bridge to nowhere, because funding didn't exist to continue the road on the other side. It is the second highest suspension bridge in the United States.

Returning to the circle, Arroyo Hondo is nine miles north of Taos on NM 522. It grew out of an 1815 Spanish land grant on the Rio Hondo. In the 1960s it was the home of the New Buffalo commune. The hippies from the commune have since dispersed into the general population of northern New Mexico, adding their own flavoring to the local culture.

The entrance to the D.H. Lawrence Ranch is on the way to Questa. Lawrence only spent a total of eleven months in New Mexico, but it influenced him profoundly. He wrote parts of several works here, and his ashes are housed in the memorial chapel. The Ranch is now owned by the University of New Mexico, which uses it for educational, cultural, and recreational purposes.

The next stop is Questa. Settled before the 1840s, it is situated in the middle of wonderful hiking and camping places, including Cabresto Lake, Mallette Canyon, and Midnight Meadows. East on NM 38 from Questa and traveling toward Red River, the road is a roller coaster ride. Red River was settled by miners from Elizabethtown in the late 1800s. The mines petered out, and the town is now known for its beautiful, high alpine scenery, skiing, fishing, and switchback roads through old mining country.

The road runs through Bobcat Pass, at 9820 feet, and descends into the high alpine Moreno Valley. The Valley is bounded by some of the most spectacular peaks in New Mexico: Agua Fria at the south end, Baldy on the north, and Wheeler on the northwest. Wheeler Peak, at 13,162 feet, is the highest point in New Mexico.

The Vietnam Veterans Peace and Brotherhood Chapel is a soaring white structure pointing to the sky from a hill just west of Angel Fire. Inside the simple monument are photographs of Vietnam casualties and a shrine of mementos and candles left by visitors.

The circle closes in Taos, entering town on tree-lined Kit Carson Road. What more could a traveler ask than a road that ends at its beginning and offers such wonders in a day's drive?