



Billy the Kid Scenic Byway

Click the small regional map to see area attractions on New Mexico's tourism website.

Named for New Mexico's most notorious outlaw, this 84-mile Byway packs in the Old West's epic conflicts, mountain scenery, sports and recreational opportunities, culture, and more. You can pick up the loop trail on Highway 380 from either Capitan on the west or from Picacho on the east, then travel around and back via NM highways 48 and 70, or on NM 214, which bisects the loop. Set aside at least two hours for your tour.

Start at the Billy the Kid Interpretive Center in the town of Ruidoso Downs for an orientation to experience ahead. Next door to the center stands the Hubbard Museum of the American West, where life-size bronze horses gallop through the garden. The museum's exhibits include antique firearms and stagecoaches, Indian art, and the Straddling Collection of bridles, saddles and other items that help interpret the legend of the American West and its continuing impact. Next up on the route is the racetrack that gave the town its name, where quarter horses race from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Ruidoso Downs is never more exciting than during the end-of-season All American Futurity, known as the world's richest quarter horse race. The track's newer Billy the Kid Casino beckons visitors year-round for video blackjack and slots action.

As you angle onto NM 48, don't miss Dowlin's Historic Old Mill, one of the last working water-powered mills in the Southwest. The mill has the added distinction of being a spot where—at least according to legend—William Bonney, better-known as Billy the Kid, once hid from the law in a flour barrel.

The byway turns north as it continues on NM 48 and traverses the charmingly rustic mountain resort town Ruidoso, one of the best places on the route to overnight. The town is named in Spanish for the rushing river through its heart, but towering snow-capped Sierra Blanca Peak is arguably the town's defining natural landmark. Ruidoso's low false-front western-style buildings house many shops and restaurants, and the surrounding countryside and forest beckon with a wealth of all-season outdoor recreational opportunities.

Continuing to tiny Alto, travelers will see the soaring white limestone façade of the Spencer Theater for the Performing Arts, a world-class gift to the community from Dow Jones heiress Jackie Spencer and her husband. Performances of all kinds are frequent, but even when nothing is scheduled, the magnificent technicolor Dale Chihuly blown glass collection, is well-worth a stop.

The Mescalero Apache lands are nearby. Weave west on NM 532 to find Ski Apache high up in the Sacramento Mountains. The winter playground takes honors as the country's southernmost ski area, guaranteeing lots of warm sunshine for traversing its runs and popular Boneyard terrain park, a real hit with snowboarders. The Mescaleros' nearby Inn of the Mountain Gods resort offers luxurious surroundings, golf, big game hunting, and gaming with a full complement of table games and poker room, as well as slot machines.

Fort Stanton, along what is now NM 214 in the Rio Bonito Valley, was home to many who made their mark in American history including, in different eras, Kit Carson and John J. "Blackjack" Pershing. Perhaps most importantly, the Cavalry Regiments of Buffalo Soldiers were also stationed in the fort. The Buffalo Soldiers were regiments of African American soldiers formed in 1866 to fight in the "Indian Wars" against native Americans, including the Apache. The last Buffalo soldier lived to see the 21st century, passing away in 2005. The Fort's complex history is detailed in the Fort Stanton Museum and visitors may explore the accompanying cemetery or the many trails that make up Fort Stanton State Monument.

At US 380, travelers can head left or right. Going left, west toward Capitan, leads to the Smokey Bear Museum and Smoky Bear Historical Park. Tiny cub, Smokey, survived a human-caused forest fire that raged through Capitan Gap in 1950 and, after his rescue, became the popular symbol of wildfire prevention. Smokey lived much of his life in National Zoo, but was interred here in 1976.

Heading east on US 380 takes you to Lincoln, a one-street town frozen in the 1870s and 1880s. The Lincoln State Monument manages nearly two dozen historic buildings, most of which are representative of the Territorial architectural style of the era. Try to imagine the tiny burg as the scene of one of New Mexico's most violent episodes, the Lincoln County War, which began when immigrant John Tunstall challenged the monopoly of the a local general store in 1877. Billy the Kid became a part of the imbroglio, and his legend as both an outlaw and protector of the oppressed grew exponentially during the multi-year siege. While escaping from the Lincoln County Courthouse in 1881, he is said to have shot and killed two deputies, and was himself shot down by the law only three months later. Interpretive materials in the Tunstall store, courthouse, and other buildings chronicle the saga.

Continuing east on US 380 the road rambles alongside the Rio Bonito through the lush orchards and ranches of the Hondo Valley. An old apple warehouse here was the studio of iconic Southwest artist Luis Jimenez until his 2006 death. Jimenez's large-scale fiberglass sculptures can be found internationally, but a fine collection of them is housed not far off the Billy the Kid Scenic Byway, at Roswell's Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art.

Bucolic San Patricio, a stone's throw from Hondo on NM 70, has a storied artistic past too. Once the home of Peter Hurd and Henrietta Wyeth, the family's Sentinel Ranch is open to visitors. Peter's son Michael oversees the ranch, multiple guest houses available for overnights, and the Hurd-Rinconada Gallery, with artwork by members of both Hurd and Wyeth family dynasties. In harvest season, visitors should stop in at the San Patricio Berry Farm, a family-run farm where you can buy berries or apples from their stand, or pick your own for the perfect snack. If you continue on westward, you'll end up back in Ruidoso Downs, having circled through a remarkable section of New Mexico, yesterday and today