



Salt Missions Trail Scenic Byway

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The Salt Missions Trail Scenic Byway traverses the heart of New Mexico, from the mountains to the plains. It follows old trade routes, rail beds, and footpaths that echo with the hazy activities of yesteryear. If you listen closely, you'll hear the footsteps of Indians trading life's necessities, the whistle of a train as it pulls into the station, or the chattering voices of families traveling across the country on Route 66.

It starts at the junction of NM 337 and NM 333, in Tijeras Canyon, which links the Sandia and Manzano Mountains, and eastern New Mexico with the Rio Grande Valley. Tijeras was the site of a large pueblo from the 1200s until 1435. It is now administered by the Cibola National Forest (Sandia Ranger Station, 11776 Highway 337; 505-281-3304). A free, self-guided tour wanders through its eighty rooms. Tijeras Canyon has long been an important travel corridor. It provided an east-west passage between the Sandia and Manzano mountains. Apaches traveled through the canyon to raid communities along the Rio Grande, and later, Hispanic settlers used the canyon for timber and game, and as a trading route.

Between Tijeras and Moriarty, the byway shares the road with Route 66 National Scenic Byway. Now known as NM 333, the old route is commemorated on the signs of many modern businesses. Some original Route 66 architecture remains, but the spirit of Route 66 lives on in the many modern family-operated businesses along the old route.

The eastern and southern branches of the byway run through the plains, while its western branch runs through the mountains. Edgewood, about halfway between Tijeras and Moriarty, is on the very edge of the mountains, as its name implies. By the time you reach Moriarty, you are definitely on flat land. Moriarty has long been an important link in transportation corridors. It was named after an early settler seeking a cure for rheumatism man who settled there in 1887. In 1901, it became a stop on the New Mexico Central Railroad, which was built between Santa Fe and Torrance. When Route 66 was realigned in 1938, it ran through Moriarty; now Moriarty is an exit off Interstate 40.

The byway follows NM 41 south out of Moriarty. It runs through McIntosh and Estancia, both also stops on the New Mexico Central, before turning west on US 60. McIntosh was a shipping center on the railroad for wool, lumber, flour, and pinto beans. Estancia, which means "small farm" or "resting place", is the seat of Torrance County. It is distinguished by its spring-fed pond, a haven for ducks and geese, and a wealth of water in the desert.

The next community on the byway is Mountainair, founded in 1902. Mountainair was known as "the pinto bean capital of the world" until the drought of the 1940s. It is now a charming community distinguished by small shops and charming architecture. The local burrito joint is painted bright red and yellow with a mural on the front, and even the facade of the Police Department/Municipal Court is decorated with southwestern designs. But Clem "Pop" Shaffer, an early settler who combined his building skills with unparalleled whimsy, built the most interesting structures. You have to see them to appreciate them. Both Rancho Bonito (1937) and the Shaffer Hotel (1923) are decorated with his unique anthropomorphic animal designs in stone, concrete, and wood and colorful southwestern symbols.

Mountainair is the starting point for the places that gave this byway its name - the ruins of Abo (9 miles west on US 60), Quarai (8 miles north on NM 55), and Gran Quivira (25 miles south on NM 55) pueblos (Abo 505-847-2400; Quarai 505-847-2290; Gran Quivira 505-847-2770). They are units of the Salinas Pueblos Missions National Monument, and a visitors'

center in Mountainair (505-847-2585; open 8:00-5:00) provides a video and museum which interpret them.

The pueblos lie within the Estancia Basin, which was a lake until about 10,000 years ago. When the brackish water evaporated, salt was left behind, a valuable trade commodity for later settlers. This area alternated between peace and war --pueblos against Apaches, and both against Spanish settlers. In the peaceful interludes, Trade routes ran through the Basin between the pueblos of the Rio Grande and Plains tribes. The people of the Saline Pueblos traded salt, corn, pinon nuts, beans, squash, and cotton with their neighbors.

Each of these places has its own special beauty. The red stone walls of Abo's San Gregorio Mission (late 1620s) and Quarai's La Purisima Concepcion (1630) rise up suddenly against a deep blue sky cushioned by massive cumulus clouds. By contrast, the ruins of San Buenaventura Mission (1659) at Gran Quivira are gradually revealed as you walk to the top of Chupadero Mesa. The gray stone walls blend with the muted colors of the desert but still contrast with the piercingly blue sky.

NM 55 and NM 337 pass through several small settlements with lyrical Spanish names on their way north to Tijeras: Manzano, Tajique, Chilili, Escobosa, and Yrisarri. Each of these communities has an intriguing history, and each is built around its small Catholic churches. The churches differ in appearance, but their importance to the lives of the communities is the same.

Like icing on the cake, there are hiking, picnicking, and camping opportunities in the lovely forested valleys of the Cibola National Forest south of Tijeras. Take your pick --Tunnel Canyon, Otero Canyon, Cedro Campground, and Pine Flat Picnic Area.