

## **El Camino Real National Scenic Byway**

**MAP: El Camino Real National Scenic Byway Map**

*Click to view Area attractions and map in new window.*

Route 66 may be New Mexico's best-known signature highway but, centuries earlier, El Camino Royal de Tierra Adentro, The Royal Road to the Interior, threaded 1,500 miles northward from Zacatecas, Mexico to the far edges of known Spanish world. Our country's oldest and most continually used "highway," the Camino Real brought European colonists to New Spain 22 years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock. Follow the royal purple signs along the Camino, which traveled much the same route as I-25 does today, from the southern edge of New Mexico to Santa Fe. There, the Camino Real veers off toward its eventual terminus, near what is Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo today. Don't miss a stop at the recently opened International Heritage Center, south of Socorro, for a full orientation to the Camino's history on both sides of the border.

### **Albuquerque**

Old Town, the historic heart of New Mexico's largest city, sprang to life some 70 years before the American Revolution. The lovely San Felipe de Neri Church anchors the plaza. Old Town stretches out over the surrounding 10-block area, defined by its flat-roofed Pueblo-Spanish adobes, all punctuated by courtyards and other charming nooks perfect for exploring on foot. Most of the buildings house restaurants, galleries, and small shops today. The Royal Road passes by two major cultural centers as it weaves through the city, the National Hispanic Heritage Center and Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. Each tells an important piece of New Mexico's story. Albuquerque deserves time for its many other attractions as well, all detailed on its website below. [www.itsatrip.org](http://www.itsatrip.org)

### **Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Center**

Early Spanish settlers named the area of woods and wildlife for the Natives they saw camped out in the area. The Camino Real ran right through what is today a national refuge along the cottonwood-shaded banks of the Rio Grande, most famous for spectacular bird-watching. See thousands upon thousands of migrating flocks, including sandhill cranes, Arctic geese, great blue herons, and both bald and golden eagles. The Bosque makes an appealing destination year-round but is at its peak appeal in the late fall. Popular Festival of the Cranes is mid-November. 9 miles south of Socorro, just outside of San Antonio. [www.friendsofthebosque.org](http://www.friendsofthebosque.org)

### **Coronado State Monument**

The monument marks where Francisco Vázquez de Coronado entered this broad valley on his search for the mythical Seven Cities of Gold. Explore excavated ruins of the Tiwa Pueblo of Kuaua, one of the thriving villages discovered by Coronado. Famed New Mexican architect John Gaw Meem designed the visitor center in his signature Territorial style. West of Bernalillo, on Hwy 550/44. [www.nmmonuments.org](http://www.nmmonuments.org)

### **El Camino Real International Heritage Center**

The newest state monument tells the story of 3 centuries of trade, commerce, conflict, and eventual confluence of cultures linking Spain, Mexico, and the United States. Following footpaths of indigenous peoples, Don Juan de Oñate claimed the land along the way for the Spanish Crown. The Center sits at the northern edge of the Chihuahuah Desert, near what was an area of difficult passage, named the Jornada del Muerto (the Journey of Death). The

exhibits include many remnants from treks along this early highway. 35 miles south of Socorro, off of I-25 at exit 115. [www.nmmonuments.org](http://www.nmmonuments.org)

### **Elephant Butte Lake State Park**

Encompassing the largest lake in New Mexico, the park sits outside Truth or Consequences, and is New Mexico's main water sports destination, with boating, fishing, water-skiing, canoeing, swimming, and more. The 40-mile long reservoir was created by damming a portion of the Rio Grande for irrigation and flood control. Along with 200 miles of shoreline, sandy beaches, and quiet coves, "The Butte" offers enough open water for cabin cruisers and houseboats, and full-service marinas to attend to them. The lake gets its name from a rock formation that resembles an elephant, at least to some observers who see the left side of its head, with a prominent ear, and its trunk curled by a foot. The butte formation, actually the eroded core of an ancient volcano, rises up in the lake's center, just northeast of the dam. The area was once the hunting ground of the fearsome tyrannosaurus Rex, largest land-dwelling predator of all time. The park's visitor center contains interpretive exhibits of the geology, history, and ecology of the area. Elephant Butte.

<http://www.emnrd.state.nm.us/PRD/elephant.htm>

### **Española**

Between the Jemez Mountains and the Truchas Peaks, the city of Española sits in the valley where Don Juan de Oñate declared New Spain's first capital in 1598.

[www.espanolaonline.com](http://www.espanolaonline.com)

### **Fort Craig National Historic Site**

Fort Craig, was one of the eight forts situated along the primary north-south road in the Rio Grande Valley. Constructed in 1854, it was one of the largest and most important forts west of the Mississippi. Fort Craig was the epicenter of the largest U.S. Civil War battle in the Southwest. The battle involved thousands of Union and Confederate troops, many of them New Mexico volunteers under the command of Kit Carson. Troops from Fort Craig included companies of Buffalo Soldiers who were garrisoned here while involved in struggles with Native Americans, deemed at the time to be hostile. Ruins sit at what was the northern end of the Journey of the Dead, one of the toughest traverses along the Camino Real. 45 miles north of Truth or Consequences, accessed from I-25 via either exit 115 (driving north) or 124 (driving south). [www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/recreation/socorro/fort\\_craig/.html](http://www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/recreation/socorro/fort_craig/.html)

### **Fort Selden State Monument**

The US Army established Fort Selden in 1865 in an effort to bring peace to the south central region of present-day New Mexico. Built on the banks of the Rio Grande, this adobe fort housed units of the U.S. Infantry and Cavalry charged with protecting settlers and travelers in the Mesilla Valley from desperados and Apache Indians. Several of the units stationed at the fort were famed Buffalo Soldiers. The young Douglas MacArthur called the fort home while his father was post commander in the late 1880s, shortly before the fort was decommissioned. At the southern end of the Journey of the Dead, one of the toughest traverses along the Camino Real. Radium Springs, 13 miles north of Las Cruces off I-25. [www.nmmonuments.org](http://www.nmmonuments.org)

### **Las Cruces**

The booming southern city of Las Cruces ("the crosses") may have been named for crosses on the graves of unfortunate travelers on El Camino Real. The Mesquite Street original townsite, with its small adobe houses painted in bright hues, was laid out in 1849 by the U.S. Army in an attempt to protect local communities and travelers. Casa Colonial at the Farm and Ranch

Heritage Museum (4100 Dripping Springs Road) represents an earlier style of Spanish architecture. [www.lascrucescvb.org](http://www.lascrucescvb.org)

### **Ohkay Owingeh (formerly San Juan Pueblo)**

Just outside of Española, this Pueblo is also near the site of the original capital established by Don Juan de Oñate. Today it bustles with a casino and other commerce along the highway, but don't miss a drive through the quieter heart of the scenic Pueblo. Just north of Española, off Hwy 68. [www.indianpueblo.org/19pueblos/ohkayowingeh.html](http://www.indianpueblo.org/19pueblos/ohkayowingeh.html)

### **Santa Fe**

The Camino Real entered Santa Fe along what it now Agua Fria Street and made its way to the city's center. The New Mexico History Museum, which includes the historic Palace of the Governors on the city's plaza, is a great place for an overview of the area's rich history. [www.santafe.org](http://www.santafe.org)