

TIME OFF



Camino de Sueños, sculpture, by Greg Reiche



An old car winds its way down La Bajada Hill, on El Camino Real.



El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (Royal Road to the Interior) International Heritage Center.

TRAVELING BACK ALONG EL CAMINO REAL

—TY BELKNAP

Heading north on I-25 after a weekend in Truth or Consequences, we stopped at a rest area. Looking out across the vast expanse to the east, we noticed an impressive sculpture that invited further investigation.

We got back on I-25, took Exit 115, went east to Highway 1, drove south about a mile, turned left on County Road 1598, and pulled off next to the sculpture. A plaque said that the thirty-foot sculpture Camino de Sueños (Road of Dreams) is the work of Placitas artist Greg Reiche. It is an entryway to a step back in time as you continue down the road another two miles to the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (Royal Road to the Interior) International Heritage Center. You can't miss it: it's the large modern building in the middle of nowhere.

Greg Reiche told me later that his sculpture, commissioned by the state, is fabricated from fifteen tons of steel, with a natural rust finish and three tons of glass. Reiche said, "My final inspiration came when I hiked about five miles and camped out near Black Mesa. I wanted to immerse myself in the site and experience what it must have been like for the first travelers moving through the wilderness at the speed of their slowest pig." He said that it is designed to reflect the grandeur of the landscape. The glass opens to the sky, enticing people to move through a passageway and follow their dreams—and explore the heritage of the Camino Real.

The center (admission \$5) contains state-of-the-art exhibits and self-guided audio tours that take visitors back in time to the adventure that was El Camino Real, North America's oldest and longest trail. The center is just across the Rio Grande from the trail, which extended fifteen hundred miles between Mexico City and the Española Valley, north of Santa Fe. On display are artifacts, art, and devotional items used along the trail that initiate anybody who never thought much about it into the scope of the Spanish colonization of the Southwest. In 1598, settlers traveled into the unknown with a caravan of carts, livestock, and soldiers.

In October of 2000 Congress added the Camino Real to the National Historic Trail System; then in 2002, the Bureau of Land Management transferred ownership of 120 acres to the state of New Mexico. It took a couple of years to build the center, which opened a year ago, operated as a state monument by the Department of Cultural Affairs. Because of its isolation, it could be viewed as a sort of government boondoggle. But it is just this isolation that makes the trip back in time seem so real.

The International Heritage Center is over a hundred miles south of Albuquerque, but rest assured that there is a lot more to see. Head back north for a few miles on Highway 1 (which as it turns out, is the El Camino Real Scenic Byway), shift gears to the 1850s, and turn right on County Road 273 to the ruins of Fort Craig. The fort was built by the Americans in 1854 to protect traders from Apache raiders on a segment of Camino Real called the Jornada del Muerto (Journey of the Dead Man). It housed Union soldiers who fought the confederates nearby at the Battle of Valverde. After the war, the fort's activity was again focused on the Indian campaigns, which included the black regiments known as the Buffalo Soldiers. Fort Craig was abandoned after Geronimo surrendered, in 1885.

The annual battle reenactment in February would be a good time to visit Fort Craig. Visit www.swcp.com/~pvtppappy/PageMill_Resource/4thTXNewsletter.html

The next stop on Highway 1 is the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, a popular destination for bird watchers, especially when the sandhill cranes are migrating. It was filled with thousands of snow geese when we visited. A famous green-chile cheeseburger at the Owl Bar in San Antonio capped a great afternoon of exploring unexpectedly special places.

During the 2006 Festival of the Cranes, activities were linked between Bosque del Apache and the International Heritage Center. Enthusiastic education specialist Claudia Gallardo said that the center is getting busier all the time, mostly due to word of mouth.

Mike Bilbo, outdoor-recreation specialist at the Socorro office of the BLM, says that the area around the Scenic Byway has some of the state's best, yet relatively little-known recreational opportunities. He says a lot of people travel the country's historical trails. Camping is not permitted at any of the places mentioned above, but a visit to the BLM Web site points out plenty of other places nearby.

Turn north eleven miles east of San Antonio on Highway 380 and follow County Road A-129 for twenty-four miles down the Quebradas Backcountry Byway, an unpaved county road traversing about twenty-four miles of rugged, colorful landscapes east of Socorro. Camping and hiking are available all along the gravel road, which returns to I-25 at the Escondito exit.

This scenic byway is just a glimpse of the Royal Road.

For more information about the International Heritage Center, visit www.elcaminoreal.org or call 505-854-3600. The BLM has a Web site at http://www.nm.blm.gov/recreation/socorro/socorro_rec_home.htm.