

# Great Explorations...

BY SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER

## Nirvana in New Mexico



They say you can “get your kicks on Route-66” but if you drive a little further west and to the north, you can get more than kicks—you can experience a desert mountain rush with surround-sound, crosswinds, Technicolor skies, and a sprinkling of wonderment.

Road Trip: We’ve become a fast nation—we prefer a jet to get us to our destination pronto and usually end up eating in expensive restaurants and spending money at overpriced tourist attractions. I plead guilty to all counts. But, not this time. Our destination was Rancho Jacona in the pueblo of Pojoaque, New Mexico, 18 miles north of Santa Fe. Thanks to web surfing and Google maps, planning was a breeze. So, we lubed up the RAV4, packed it to the hilt with food and drink, and took off.

Deciding to take our time, we left on a Saturday morning in June for a Monday arrival to rendezvous with my younger son Adam and his gal pal Marlene who were driving to Pojoaque from Los Angeles. Being younger with heartier bodies and souls, they camped along the way. Hubby and I, on the other hand, have aged gracefully away from the sleeping bag stage and into motel stage, but not the ordinary chain types. Although a first-night stop in Bowie, Texas was uneventful, our second night was a trip back in time as we pulled into Tucumcari, NM to rest our heads at the Blue Swallow Motel. Built in 1939, the Blue Swallow consists of a dozen or so tourist-court-like rooms with attached garages, pink stucco façade with aqua blue doors, and is loaded with neon lights. The art-deco interior (with blue swallow chenille bedspreads and wildly colorful vintage ceramic table lamps) is cozy-comfy. Outside our door were brightly painted retro metal chairs, inviting us to sit a spell and visit with our vagabond neighbors. We did just that and met folks from all over the U.S.—some on Harleys; mostly families traveling caravan style.



Sue, Gene, Adam & Marlene



Monday morning we headed toward Santa Fe with the altitude getting higher and the mountains looming taller. We stopped on the edge of town and bought groceries since our casita came with a fully-equipped kitchen.

**Rancho Jacona:** We knew from researching that Rancho Jacona was in the valley area of Pojoaque (poh-WAH-kay), one of the 19 ancient pueblos (towns) in New Mexico. Pueblo people rooted in this region of the southwest are descendants of an indigenous Native American culture that has established itself over many centuries. Archeological studies of the area have dated inhabitation of the historic Pojoaque Pueblo area as early as 500 AD. In

the early 1600s the first Spanish mission was founded.

In 1702 a large area of the valley was granted by Spain to the family of Ignacio Roybal whose house still stands near Rancho Jacona. The area now comprising the ranch was first built upon in the early 1700s with the establishment of a two-room house that survives as the eastern two rooms of Rooster House (where we stayed). It was then a bedroom with fireplace and a kitchen/

living room with an adobe oven (horno) out back. One ceiling beam and several windows have been replaced, but the walls, fireplace, horno and the rest of the ceiling are original. This house and others on the property were occupied by family descendants until 1929. The present owners live in the Main House (also the office area) built in the mid to late 1700s.

Described as “vacation houses in idyllic oasis near Santa Fe in the Rio Grande Valley between mountain ranges” the sentence does not do justice to the 11

casitas on 35 acres lush with plant life, tall cottonwoods and fruit trees, lily ponds, sculpture gardens, sloping terrain, and the nearby river bottoms that allow for miles of hiking. Each furnished casita is built in pueblo style and has names like Rooster, Rabbit, Lizard, Butterfly, Frog, etc. with interiors alive with color and themed

art. Two enormous iron roosters flanked the entrance gate to our patio and were evident throughout the house in the form of lamps and other décor, but with subtlety.

Rancho Jacona is also a working farm with chickens, geese, goats, sheep, rams, rabbits, burros, and peacocks. The peacocks, peahens and peachicks wander freely about the property, putting on a feathery show, assuring an early morning rise by their screechy howl (we got used to it). The owners’ four dogs are let out between noon and 4 p.m. each day to introduce themselves and beg for pats on the head. But the best part of all is the gift of fresh eggs every morning from the chickens.

With an outdoor grill on our large patio, we grilled dinner nightly. In this climate, the temperature drops about 20 degrees in the evenings so being outdoors was most pleasant. We swam in the pool, hiked, visited the animals, gazed at the lily ponds, walked the grounds, and soaked up the vibes of Rooster house. There is something pretty magical about a house built in 1702, yet the doorways were not meant for my six-foot-three-inch son who quickly learned to duck.

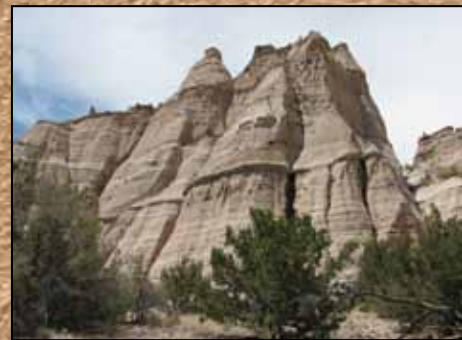
We set aside one day for a trip into Santa Fe where we visited a few missions and art galleries; we also made side trips to Bandelier National Park and the outlandish, unbelievable Tent Rocks. The cone-shaped tent rock formations are the products of volcanic eruptions that occurred six to seven million years ago and left pumice, ash and tuff deposits over 1,000 feet thick. Precariously perched on many of the tapering tents (hoodoos) are boulder caps that protect the softer pumice and tuff below. The tent rock formations vary in height up to 90-feet displaying bands of gray interspersed with beige and pink-colored rock along the cliffs.

By Friday, it was time to leave the land of enchantment and head back to our respective normal lives. It was refreshing to be away from technology (although Rancho Jacona does have a Wi-Fi area for techies) and lose ourselves in an ancient area so steeped in



history. But there was one more stop to behold.

Palo Duro Canyon: Driving back through Amarillo, we ventured south to Palo Duro Canyon where we’d made a reservation to stay in one of the three stone cabins built into the precipice overlooking the canyon. As the second largest canyon in the U.S. (first being the Grand Canyon, of course) Palo Duro is



30,000 acres of breathtaking views. It is 120 miles long, as much as 20 miles wide, and has a maximum depth of more than 800 feet. Its elevation at the rim is 3,500 feet above sea level. The cabins have beds, but don’t expect any frills. A small refrigerator, microwave and coffee pot will offer you some of the comforts of home, but the outdoor grill is about all you need, so bring along some charcoal and you’re set. As nightfall approaches, the stars offer a cascade of light, yet

be prepared for the strong winds that appear at a moment’s notice to remind you that nature indeed rules here.

Think about taking your own road trip soon and follow the unbeaten path. After all, the road less traveled most often turns out to be the best road traveled.

