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## Northwest New Mexico Road Trip (N22A)

For my 350<sup>th</sup> trip since I graduated college I headed for northwest New Mexico, targeting sites near Grants and Zuni Pueblo, Aztec and Española, New Mexico.

But first, my departure day started with me buying a new set of tires. I discovered a severe wear spot on one front tire when I was loading the car the night before, and the other front tire wasn't much better. That happens when you put 40,000 miles of road trips on a set of tires in less than two years.

It's about 500 miles to Grants, New Mexico, which I've done in a day before, but this time I wanted to get there in time to do some afternoon sightseeing, so I figured I'd get a head start by leaving home in the afternoon, putting a couple hundred miles behind me before turning in.

I ended up in Seligman, Arizona that night. Seligman is a classic Route 66 town, and still features a lot of old-style Route 66 kitsch. It was a group of Seligman residents who convinced the state of Arizona to dedicate the old Route 66 as a historic highway, a key step in revitalizing interest in Route 66. Thus, Seligman has earned the nickname "Birth Place of Historic Route 66".



If you're getting your kicks on Route 66, I recommend forgetting Winona and instead stopping in Seligman for some classic Route 66 kitsch.



Grants, New Mexico is a fading mining town on Route 66, but it has lost much of its Route 66 kitsch (unlike Gallup, New Mexico, which still has a lot). But Grants has added a Route 66 Drive-thru sign.

One of my targeted stops during my Grants stay was the New Mexico Mining Museum. The Grants region was originally well-known for its fluorspar mining, and in the 1930s it was the “Carrot Capital of the United States”. However, in the decades following World War II until the 1980s it was the “Uranium Capital of the World” because of how productive its uranium mines were. The museum focuses on the area’s uranium mining history.



Several forms that uranium takes on were on display at the museum.



Although not the museum's primary focus, it also included displays of archaeological finds from the region's many ancestral Puebloan ruins sites. Grants sits on New Mexico's Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway.



Another of my planned stops was a viewpoint on nearby Mt. Taylor that faces the area to the north. But a busy monsoon season appeared to have damaged the already rough road, so I didn't get as far up the mountain as planned.

In Navajo tradition Mt. Taylor is Tsoodzil, one of four sacred mountains that define the boundaries of the Dinéyah, the traditional homeland of the Navajo. The mountain is also sacred to the Acoma, Laguna and Zuni pueblos and to the Hopi people.



View of Mt. Taylor from near Grants



El Malpais National Monument and El Malpais National Conservation Area preserve the volcanic landscape of the Zuni-Bandera Volcanic Field, the second largest volcanic field in the Basin and Range Province. Lava flows here began about 700,000 years ago; the most recent one was less than 4,000 years ago. The volcanos here are currently dormant.

Sandstone Bluff Overlook provides a nice view of the lava fields below. Here, a “pothole” in the sandstone captured recent rainwater, allowing spadefoot toad eggs to hatch – a number of tadpoles were swimming around in this pothole, trying to get to maturity before the pothole dries up. Alas, a heavy, not-forecasted monsoon shower in the area killed my plans to take the Chain of Craters National Back Country Byway through the region this morning – the route is impassable after rains.



My next stop was Zuni Pueblo. There are 22 Native American tribes in New Mexico, 19 of which live on pueblos, a unique-to-New Mexico type of reservation.

The peoples who once lived in the ancient cliff dwellings and other ruins sites in the Four Corners region have been called the Anasazi. This was a Navajo term that some have said means “ancient enemy” (“ancestors of our enemies” is closer). These people disappeared across the region in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, creating all sorts of speculation among the conspiracy theory-minded folks out there.

The more appropriate term “ancestral Puebloan” has now gained widespread use, as we now know that the people who lived in those ancient sites didn’t just up and disappear. Long-term drought forced them to abandon their old settlements, and they headed east. The Hopi and the 19 pueblo tribes of New Mexico all trace their origins to these early Puebloan peoples.

Many of the Puebloan tribes created new settlements along the Rio Grande River, although others – including the Zuni, Acoma and Laguna – settled in western New Mexico, with the Zuni being in the most isolated location. (Acoma’s Sky City is generally regarded as the oldest continuously occupied community in what is now the United States.)

Most pueblos have restrictions on the movements and photography by non-tribal members on tribal lands, but some do offer guided tours to certain sites. I wanted to get information for future reference on a couple of guided tours to archeological sites on Zuni lands, and to visit the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center in the main Zuni village. Among the museum’s displays are archeological finds from Hawikku, one of the archaeological sites that I’d like to visit someday.

Hawikku was founded in around 1400, and was one of the largest Zuni pueblo villages when the Spanish arrived on the scene. Francisco Vásquez de Coronado conquered Hawikku in 1540, making it the first pueblo that the Spanish conquered.

The next day, I headed north along some backroads to get to a hiking destination. Along the way, I passed through the heart of Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Chaco is my favorite ruins sites, and I've been there a handful of times over the years – and I visited one of its outlier sites, Pueblo Pintado, just last month. Still, I couldn't resist a quick drive through the park to check out the ruins again, covering the 8-mile loop road in about two hours.



The ruins of the Chetro Ketl great house, as seen from across Chaco Canyon



I then headed for the Ah-shi-sle-pah Wilderness Area for some hiking. Ah-shi-sle-pah preserves a badlands area where gully erosion is exposing interestingly-shaped hoodoos. Petrified wood and dinosaur fossils have also been found in the area.



One of the hoodoos at Ah-shi-sle-pah. A layer of harder capstone slows the erosion of the softer clays below it, leading to the creation of hoodoos.



I finished the day at Angel Peak Scenic Area, a badlands area southeast of Bloomfield, New Mexico. I visited here about five years ago, but monsoon storms were moving in, limiting my stop here at that visit.

The next morning, I headed for the 1948 Aztec UFO Crash Site along the Alien Mountain Bike Trail northeast of Aztec, New Mexico to get a photo of the plaque there. Unfortunately, the plaque apparently was recently stolen.

No doubt part of the military's ongoing cover-up of the incident.

My next stop was at Echo Amphitheater, a large natural alcove in a sandstone butte that has especially strong echoing properties.



Echo Amphitheater Echo Amphitheater Echo Amphitheater Echo Amphitheater



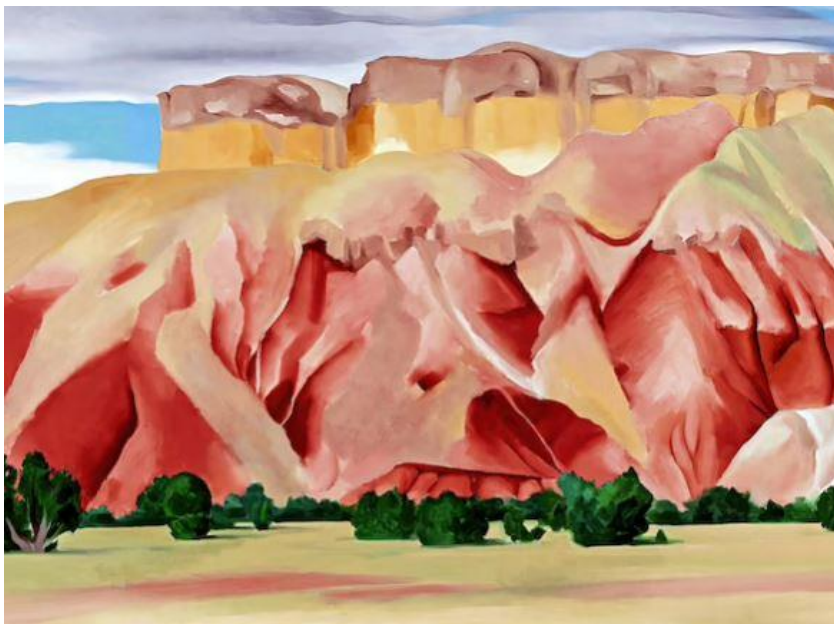
Colorful sandstone layers in the Echo Amphitheater area date back to the Triassic (lower reddish orange layers) and Jurassic (upper white, yellow, buff layers) periods.

It was these natural landscape colors that drew famous painter Georgia O’Keeffe to the area. She eventually owned a summer home and some acres on Ghost Ranch, now a retreat and education center just down the road from Echo Amphitheater, and a year-round home and studio in nearby Abiquiu.





Ghost Ranch scenery...



... and an excerpt from one of O'Keeffe's interpretations of it.



Ghost Ranch is the site of a major archaeological site associated with the Gallina people who were in the region from about 1050 AD to 1300 AD. Ghost Ranch is also home to some of the most productive Triassic Period dinosaur fossil quarries. One Triassic Period dinosaur – Coelophysis – is the New Mexico state fossil. Nearly 1000 of these have been found in one of the ranch’s dinosaur quarries.



This Coelophysis fossil cast is on display at the ranch’s paleontology museum. The ranch also has a museum focused on anthropology/archaeology. I visited both museums while I was at Ghost Ranch.



Georgia O’Keeffe’s Abiquiu home and studio are now a museum (I found out that advance reservations are required to visit it).



St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, in Abiquiu’s La Merced del Pueblo Abiquiú, a preserved historic genizaro land grant settlement.

After visiting Ghost Ranch, I headed for an unmarked ruins site near El Rito that I had originally “discovered” while studying Google satellite images of the region. Fencing and scrub severely limited my view of the site, though, which turned out to be the ruins of Pueblo Sapawe.



Google Satellite image of Pueblo Sapawe, a Tewa pueblo ancestral site that was occupied from about 1350 AD to 1550 AD. It featured several large plazas surrounded by adobe buildings, and it may have been the largest Pueblo IV adobe community in the Southwest before the site was abandoned.

The site is closed to the public, and its location is address-restricted.



From the passing road, I only got a few distant glimpses of the site.



As it happens, the anthropology (archaeology) museum at Ghost Ranch had a display of artifacts recovered during digs at Pueblo Sapawe.



I took the interpretive trail at New Mexico's Los Luceros Historic Site. It is a classic historic ranch property, and before that a Puebloan Native American site. Among its historic buildings is this, the main ranch house, also known as a <whisper>hacienda</whisper>.

I stayed in Española for three nights, using it as my base for exploring the area. Two pueblos, Ohkay Owingeh and Santa Clara, overlap the city here. The Spanish had named Ohkay Owingeh San Juan de los Caballeros after they conquered it in 1598. This was Spain's first territorial capital for what became New Mexico – they moved their capital to present-day Santa Fe in 1610.

Among my stops while here was the somewhat disappointing Poeh Museum and Cultural Center in Pojoaque Pueblo, and plans to see Nambé Pueblo's Nambé Falls at Nambé Falls and Lake Recreation Area. Alas, due to recent heavy monsoon rains, the short hike to see the falls would have required wading through the creek at several spots, which wasn't going to happen.



As close as I got to Nambé Falls

One of the highlights of my Española stay was my visit to the newer Manhattan Project National Historical Park, which has units at Hanford, Washington, Oak Ridge, Tennessee and Los Alamos, New Mexico. Although I had previously visited some of the sites now in the park, and I had (barely) visited Los Alamos several years ago, this was my first visit to park sites since the park was created, adding to my list of official National Park System units that I've visited.

The U.S. military took over a prestigious boys' ranch on the isolated Pajarito Plateau during World War II and created the Los Alamos National Laboratory there, where the Manhattan Project's research, development and creation took place for the atomic bombs that the United States dropped on Japan in 1945 to end World War II.

Site development was led by General Leslie Groves, who previously led the building of the Pentagon. Project director at Los Alamos was physicist Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer.



Reconstruction of what was the main gate guard station at Los Alamos during the war. The existence of Los Alamos was top secret at the time, and admission to the site was severely restricted. Los Alamos National Laboratory continues to exist, but now it surrounds the city rather than includes it. Access to the lab is still limited.



Statues of Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, left, and Gen. Leslie Groves, right, in front of Fuller Lodge, one of the boys' ranch buildings that was converted to Manhattan Project use.

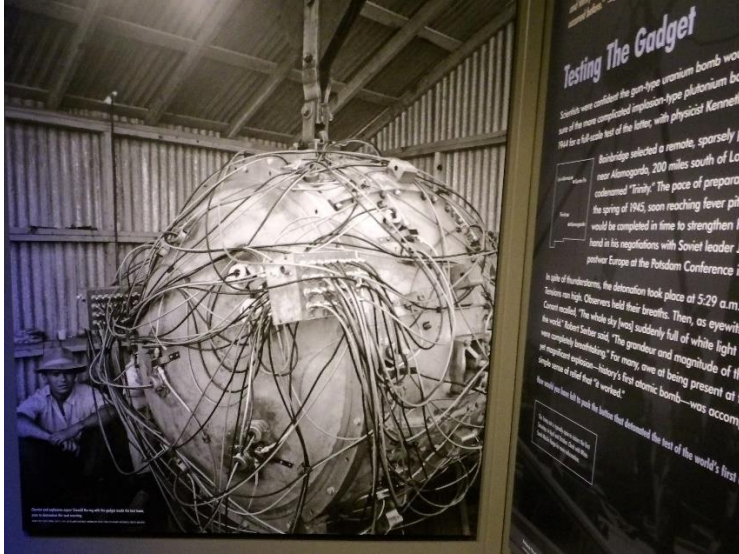
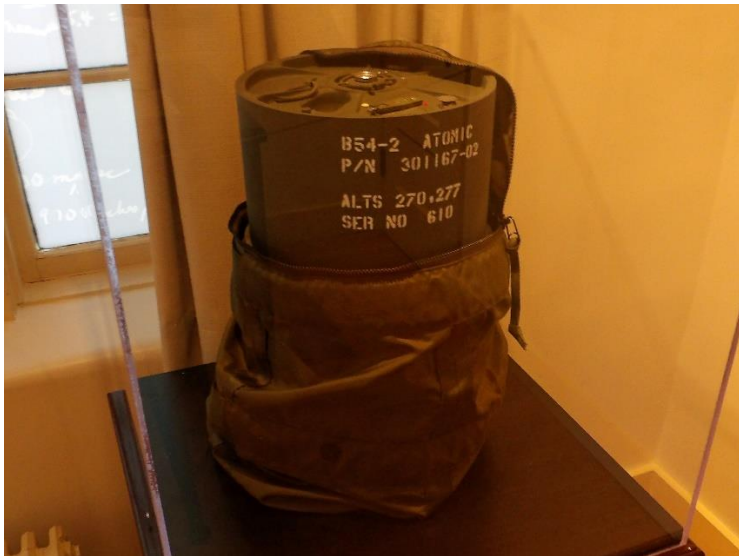


Photo of the first atomic bomb built at Los Alamos. It was detonated at the Trinity Site in southern New Mexico on July 16, 1945.

It used a “plutonium implosion fission” approach, where several small explosions in the bomb quickly pushed against the plutonium fuel at its core from all directions. This compression of the plutonium fuel sets off the chain reaction that leads to the nuclear explosion. The wires you see were used to set off all those small explosions.

The photo was among the displays at the Los Alamos History Museum, located in what had been the boys’ ranch guest house.



Small nuclear devices can be purchased at the museum’s gift shop.



This cottage served as Dr. Robert Oppenheimer’s home during his years at Los Alamos.



Full size models of the Little Boy (black, Hiroshima) and Fat Man (yellow, Nagasaki) atomic bombs, among the displays at the Bradbury Science Museum. The museum was named after Norris Bradbury, who succeeded Oppenheimer as Los Alamos National Laboratory director. Bradbury was the lab's longest serving director.



Los Alamos is surrounded by rugged, undeveloped terrain, so wild animals often enter the town. This was one of three deer I spotted wandering the streets of Los Alamos. Although “wild” animals may be a stretch – this deer looked both ways before crossing the street.

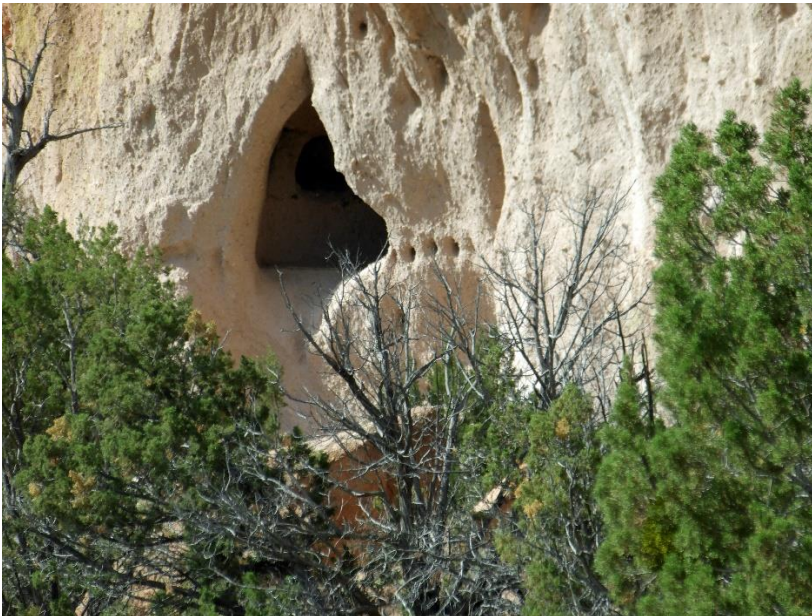
Because I'd already been to Bandalier National Monument a few times, I kept it as a possible destination only if I had some spare time after I finished up all of my other Española area plans.



Just to the west, massive volcanic eruptions had spewed out about 75 cubic miles of lava and ash. Much of the ash settled in this area, it got compressed and became volcanic tuff rock. Tuff isn't so tough, as it is relatively easy to cut into building blocks or to carve caves into, something that early Native Americans did in abundance in the area. Bandelier National Monument preserves some of the resulting pueblo and cliff dwelling ruins sites in both its Frijoles Canyon and Tsankawi locations.



In Frijoles Canyon, restored ruins of Tyuonyi Pueblo built with tuff blocks. Many of the holes that dot the lower part of the canyon wall were carved into the tuff by Native Americans.



A carved-in-tuff home at Tsankawi. To the right is a row of smaller holes. Those were used to support logs that supported floors and roofs of buildings constructed along the face of the wall.



You don't have to be in the national monument to find more examples of homes carved into volcanic tuff. Some of these holes in the canyon wall along Highway 4 were carved by Native Americans. There is even a small bit of surviving tuff brick wall, center-left.



As the sign suggests, Utah Junipers such as this one at Tsankawi do indeed make good restrooms when out hiking in the high desert. They're usually big enough to provide some privacy. And unlike Piñon Pines, their branches are softer than they look and thus can be used like toilet paper. Just don't use a branch with berries on it – the berries tend to stain the skin.



At White Rock, New Mexico's Overlook Park, you get an outstanding view of the Rio Grande River. Trails here lead to some rock art sites.



Valles Caldera National Preserve, a National Park System unit, protects the lands of Valles Caldera, the source of the volcanic tuff found at Los Alamos, Bandelier and elsewhere. The caldera is 13.7 miles in diameter, and resulted after eruptions 1.25 million years ago emptied out the magma chamber below, causing the chamber to collapse. As the chamber refilled, more eruptions occurred. This picture shows both the Valle Grande valley and some of the hills created as more magma pushed into the chamber and up through to the surface. Currently dormant, Valle Caldera is one of three "supervolcanos" in the United States – the others underlie Yellowstone and California's Long Valley.



A prairie dog at Valles Caldera contemplates the threat that the supervolcano beneath him poses to his colony.



Jemez Historic Site, a New Mexico state park, preserves the ruins of Gisewatowa Pueblo and the ruins of San José de los Jémez, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish colonial mission built there. Gisewatowa Pueblo was constructed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Spanish arrived in the 1580s, although the present mission church was built in the 1620s. The pueblo was abandoned when the Jemez people participated in the 1680 Pueblo Uprising that expelled the Spanish from New Mexico until 1692. Much of Gisewatowa Pueblo remains unexcavated, appearing as rubble mounds; ruins of the old Spanish mission are mostly visible.



The ruins of the 1620s mission church



The fireplace in the center of a mission room threw me at first, as it reminded me of a kiva, a Puebloan ceremonial room or structure. It turns out that after the expulsion of the Spanish, the Native Americans converted one of the mission structures into a kiva.



A view of an eroded layer in the canyon walls above Jemez Historic Site. If this erosion pattern looks familiar, you're probably thinking of nearby Kasha Katuwe. This cone-like erosion pattern appears in volcanic tuff from Jemez Caldera.



At Jemez Pueblo, I toured the very good museum at its Walatowa Visitor Center, and then crossed the street to get some photos at its Red Rock Trails park. I stopped here back in 2005, and one of my favorite photos from that trip still tops the ones I got this time.



My favorite Red Rocks Trails photo from my 2005 stop here.



This was my third time driving along Highway 550 in this part of New Mexico since last November, and each time I passed a sign for the Perea Nature Trail. So, this time I hiked the trail.



The marker along the Perea Nature Trail identifies this plant as Broom Snakeweed, and says that Native Americans used it to treat colds, insect bites and wounds. It also works as a laxative for horses. I do wonder how people figured out stuff like this.



Heading west along I-40 as I was making my way back home, I stopped at the Indian Market at Continental Divide, New Mexico, a Route 66 souvenir place located on the continental divide. Literally right on the continental divide. Their men's bathroom is in the back of the store, with a pair of urinals on the back (north) wall. Flush the left urinal, and the wastewater eventually ends up in the Pacific Ocean. Flush the right urinal, and the wastewater makes its way into the Atlantic Ocean.





An original stretch (1921-1930) of Route 66 between Flagstaff and Williams, Arizona

Because my plans to visit Acoma Pueblo's Sky City fell through due to COVID-related closures on the pueblo, I had a little extra time on my hands during the drive home.

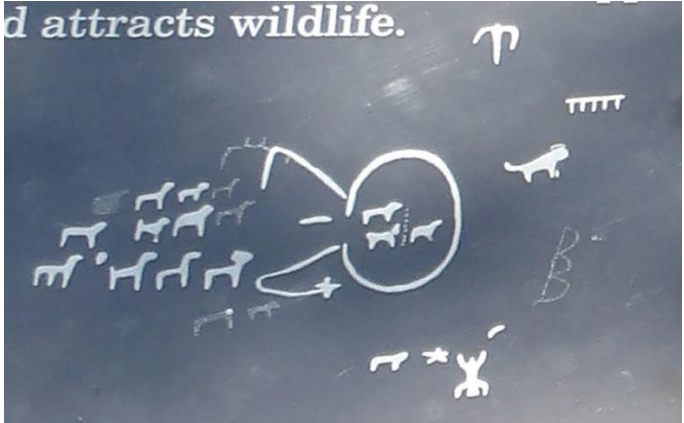
A few years ago, I took the short hike to Keyhole Sink to see a particular petroglyph panel. The panel appears to represent a hunting scene at the sink. It was likely created by the Cohonina people about 1000 years ago.

Although I saw a number of petroglyphs at the site, I didn't find the panel I was looking for. Later, I found that one of my photos of the site had indeed captured part of the rather faint rock art panel. I figured I'd have to go back sometime to get a picture of the full panel now that I knew where it was at.

I added that return visit to the drive home on this trip.



I easily found the panel this time, but it is still hard to see, both due to its faintness, and that part of it was in bright sun and part in dark shadows.



Here's what you're trying to see. It's a pleasant enough hike that perhaps I'll have to try again on a light overcast day.

That's it for this trip. Time to get started on the next 350 trips.