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## Inspirational drives in New Mexico

By Jane Cassie, Special to Coquitlam NOW

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**Design and carved decoration of this portal, are typical southwestern style, found in New Mexico.**

**Photograph by: Jack Parsons, Santa Fe Visitors Bureau**

New Mexico is certainly the land of enchantment: from wide open mesas to its long, winding roads, the 194,725 square scenic kilometres will inspire, captivate and put a song in your heart.

The best way to check out New Mexico's treasures is by getting off the beaten path and on to roads less travelled. Here are two worthy trips.

Our drive begins on a plateau of wide open space and big sky. Jagged million-year-old monoliths jut up from the desert floor like native arrowheads. Snow-tipped and 3,962 metres high, the Sangre de Cristo peaks frame the backdrop. And the sun illuminates the windswept mesa like a painter's palette -- purely magical.

After veering on to Highway 503, we ascend to greater heights, navigating turns, hairpins and arroyo-etched hillsides. Historical townships reflecting the Spanish heritage sprinkle the way.

We stop at the Santuario de Chimayo, a quaint country chapel on the outskirts of Chimayo where people come for the healing powers of its sacristy soil. Unfortunately a service is in session when we arrive so we seek out some retail therapy at a few of the nearby galleries.

Heading north on to Highway 518, we bisect the artsy hamlet of Cordova and climb to the ridge-top town of Truchas. Rio Grande vistas are provided from its 2,454 metres perch and we can see why Robert Redford chose this picturesque setting for *The Milagro Bean Field War*.

We weave in and out of pine-clad Carson National Forest and get glimpses of the distant Rockies. Las Trampas, home to the 1700s colonial-style San José de Gracia Church, is the next driveby and a short detour later is Picuris, a modern day pueblo known for its mica-flecked pottery.

At Peñasco we take Route 518 and just south of Taos is Ranchos de Taos and the famous 18th-century San Francisco de Asis Church. As well as being one of the most painted buildings in the world, this sanctuary was the inspiration of Georgia O'Keeffe, New Mexico's iconic artist.

Distance from Espanola: 93.3 kilometres with a two-hour driving time.

We next drove the Enchanted Circle, a loop that rings Wheeler Peak, the highest mountain in New Mexico.

Signage throughout the state is pretty sketchy but on this scenic highway 64 there are a number of history markers and must-see memorials. In the lush Hondo Valley, we deke into the Kiowa Ranch where the ashes of British writer, D.H. Lawrence have been laid to rest, and near Angel Fire check out the monument commemorating the Vietnam Vets.

Culture is big in New Mexico, but in these parts, the outdoors is bigger. Funnelling from Angel Fire's summit are ski runs that boast a 2,180-foot vertical drop. In summer, this resort becomes a magnet for golfers, hikers and mountain bikers. Fishing and windsurfing gurus head to the neighbouring community of Eagle Nest Lake and snowmobiles trace the wind-blown summit beyond at Bobcat Pass.

Red River Resort is the next ski hill on our road romp. Silverado, Goldrush and Lucky Strike are just a few runs that honour its gold mining past. Many plummet from peak to base, offering a ski-out escape. This year-round playground also offers summer action: ride the range, reel in a catch, hike the hills. We stop to saunter the laid-back streets checking out everything from western gear at The Knot Hole to souvenirs at the Pioneer Emporium.

Taos Ski Resort is the next, and the biggest of them all. After bisecting the artsy community of Arroyo Seco, we cleave through a narrow valley that snakes to its base. A hundred runs sweep over the powder terrain and 13 lifts whisk gravity-defying boarders to paradise.

More adventures can be found just north of Questa. We follow Route 378 through the village of Cerro then enter the Wild River Recreation Area. An asphalt drive loops around a pancake-flat plateau.

Campgrounds veer off this main artery and the sheer-sided Rio Grande Gorge pulsates at the hub. It's an 800-foot drop to the river below and in between is a profusion of plants, animals and adventure.

Instead of hiking the hills solo, we let a llama tote our load. Whether it's just a day trip or a three day walk in the wilderness, owner Stuart Wilde and his Wild Earth Llama Adventures provides an exciting experience.

Distance: 136 kilometres and 2.5 to three hours of driving time.

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**Photograph by: Jack Parsons, Santa Fe Visitors Bureau**

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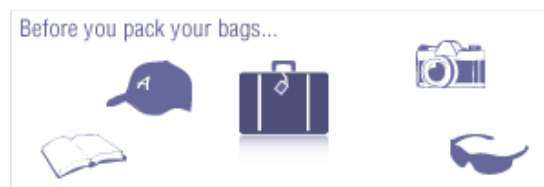
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