

Oasis in the Desert

*From rattlesnakes to nukes,
Albuquerque offers contrasts.*

Tooling along I-25 or I-40, it would be easy to miss the tiny brown signs pointing toward Albuquerque's museums, Old Town and zoo. And that would be a shame. For these spots offer an authentic taste of a truly diverse city, an American city named for a Spanish Duke, a city that welcomes long-haul truckers. Which it should. After all, Albuquerque has served as a center of trade and transportation since 1821.

That's when William Becknell drove the first packtrain from Missouri to New Mexico. At the time, Becknell was up to his beard in debt. Desperate, he strapped trade goods to the backs of mules and skipped town. He headed west, then south, preferring the threat of Indians, prairie fires and thirst to time in jail.

But Becknell survived. And just north of Albuquerque, he found isolated Hispanic villagers as starved for hardware as he was for cash. His timing was perfect.



Drop a load: Visitors to the National Atomic Museum see bombers, missiles, subs and other weapons of nuclear war.

So was his showmanship. Back home, Becknell pulled up in the center of town, drew a knife and slit his bulging saddlebags. Onlookers gasped as silver pesos spilled onto the street and rolled in the gutter.

A new era had begun. Over the next 60 years, hundreds of traders followed Becknell's lead. His trail became known as

the Santa Fe (now I-25). And Albuquerque, already an Indian trading post, soon established itself as a way station for Anglo traders, many of whom continued on south to Chihuahua, Mexico.

So why waste a blue Southwestern sky swabbing dust off the truck or dozing in front of a TV? Get out and experience what this historic, multi-cultural city has to offer. You can bobtail to lots of places, and the city is compact enough that if you want to leave the rig at the truckstop, you can walk or take a short cab or bus ride to most of the interesting sights.

"It's lots more fun than just sitting around" until he's ready to get back under the wheel, says Robert Hanson, who hauls for Cliff Viessman Inc. Even so, except for a trip to California, "where I piled a bunch of guys from my yard in my truck and drove to Knott's Berry Farm," he doesn't sightsee often. Why not? "I wish I had more money," says Hanson, voicing a common concern.

That's not a problem here. Albuquerque boasts several free and inexpensive attractions. Start where the city itself began, at Old Town, the original four-block area consisting of a 300-year-old church and dozens of pink adobe homes wedged together (for protection) around a central plaza.

Stroll down portals hung with ropes of scarlet chiles — the heart and "heat" of everything from chorizo to salsa. That's where Native Americans peddle homemade jewelry, baskets and pottery. They sit in the shade, their backs pressed against the cool



Past meets present: Spanish style in churches and elsewhere reflects the city's heritage and its enduring traditions.

adobe walls and their wares spread on blankets at their feet.

Most of the old buildings house restaurants, art galleries or shops. But one, The American International Rattlesnake Museum, showcases snakes. Lots of them! It claims the largest collection of different species of live rattlers in the world, including a rare Albino Western Diamondback.

Bobby Harrell, who hauls a refrigerated trailer for Rockin' K Express, bobtailed down from the Albuquerque Travel Center while "waiting on a load to go back east." Another visitor was Jeff Staggs, an ex-driver from Sweetwater, Texas, who recalls rattlesnake round-ups. "I used to bag them as a kid," he tells us, "but I had never heard of this place."

The museum is small and cluttered. Photos and clippings surround the glass enclosures. One features a man, his mouth scarred, who chomped off a rattler's head with his teeth. Why? "He bit me first," he explains. OK ...

"NO!": Young gorilla at the Rio Grande Zoological Park gets straight with Mom.



Aline A. Newman



Despite the “Ripley’s Believe It Or Not” atmosphere, director Bob Myers strives to dispel reptile myths. “I hear snake stories all day long,” says Myers. “Most are exaggerated, like fish tales.” For instance, he insists, “Rattlers rarely kill people. Over 99 percent of bite victims survive!”

Myers keeps non-poisonous snakes out back for folks to handle (like the 92-year-old lady who cuddled one for nearly an hour) and passes out “Certificates of Bravery.”

The Rio Grande Zoological Park also promotes animal conservation. Sprawled over 60 acres, it’s a lush oasis of roaring waterfalls, English ivy and swaying palms. “It’s the biggest zoo I’ve ever been in,” Harrell says. And the perfect place to stretch muscles and walk off road fatigue. Staggs has visited before and notices, “a lot of new stuff and things they’ve improved on.”

Most exciting is the aquarium, which wasn’t quite finished when we visited. Plans include an eel tank, viewing tunnel, touch pool, coral reef and shark tank. “When they get that finished off,” Staggs says, “it’s going to be quite nice.” And not at all misplaced.

True, New Mexico is the third-driest state in the nation. Its most famous river, the Rio Grande, often flows at a trickle. And the sun shines 300 days a year. Even so, 88 kinds of fish live there. And New Mexicans appreciate them. Nowhere are people more aware of the importance of water.

Perhaps more surprising than an aquarium in the desert are polar bears in Albuquerque’s heat. “I’d never seen any,” says Brenda Sadler, a trainee with Landstar TLC. “And I never thought they’d be here!”

But they are. Chile and Lear, named for the jet that brought her, share a pool. Chile loves dozing in the sun (perhaps working on a tan?) while Lear swims compulsively. This

What’s shakin’? Rattlesnake Museum even has a petting zoo, of sorts. At the Rio Grande Zoo, drivers (l-r) Bobby Harrell, Dan Perry, Brenda Sadler and Robert Hanson brake for flamingos.

amused Sadler who says he “didn’t know (bears) could swim the backstroke.”

Visitors can soon see just how they do it. An expansion is underway that will add two pools, an ice cave and an underwater viewing area. Already enjoying spacious quarters

elsewhere in the zoo are siamang, orangutan and lowland gorilla families.

“I liked the monkeys,” says Hanson. He looks wistful. “I also liked watching the people walk around, especially the kids. I’m coming back if I’m ever out here again. Hopefully, my wife and boys will be with me.” Adds Dan Perry, a driver for Hawkeye Wood Shavings, “It’s real easy to get to,” “And there’s adequate parking.”

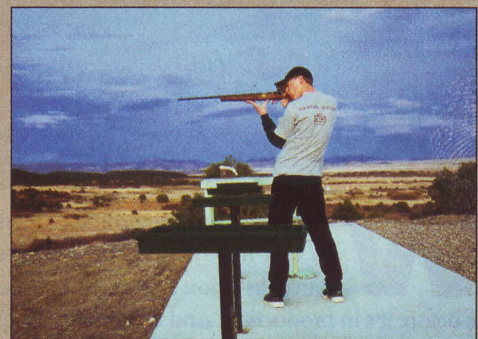
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Ready, Aim, Fire! NRA firing range just a short shot off I-25.

Something happens to folks in New Mexico. Closet cowboys and cowgirls, fans of Louis L’Amour western novels and “Gunsmoke” reruns, shuck their baseball caps and sneakers and pull on high-heeled boots and ten-gallon hats. And if they want to slap on a pair of six-guns, they do that, too. New Mexico doesn’t require pistol permits.

Which is what made Raton, N.M., the ideal spot for locating the National Rifle Association’s Whittington Center, the largest, wildest and most complete outdoor shooting facility in the world. That, and the fact that mule deer, elk, antelope, bear, and even cougars still roam this land just like they did when Ute warriors galloped over the mesas and Kit Carson scouted on the Santa Fe Trail.

As many as 70,000 people visit each year. Most belong to the NRA, but non-members are welcome, too. For a \$10 fee, guests can tour the grounds and try out one of the ranges. All kinds are available,



from muzzle-loading to high-powered rifle. Shotguns can be rented for \$5 per day and skeet and trap cost \$3 a round. Sporting clays go for \$5. Ammunition costs extra.

It’s best to call ahead and ask if a particular range is open for casual use. Since all are world-class in size and exact in dimension, the center hosts many competitions and special events each year. Special Forces sniper training was going on when we were there.

The center is located about 10 miles south of Raton, N.M., on Highway 64, just 4 miles southwest off of I-25. With over 33,000 acres, there’s plenty of space to park your truck. For information, call (505) 445-3615. ✪

SPECIAL RIG REPORT

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surfaces with varying friction characteristics, ideal for testing brakes and ABS systems, and the Vehicle Structural Durability Testing Facility, the torture test area. I drive the oval and two laps around the torture test.

The "events" include chatter and impact bumps, a frame twister, cobblestone roads, a resonance road, staggered bumps and an undulating road. They test any truck's endurance and also the driver's stamina.

Among the most interesting are the undulating road and the staggered bumps. The 1,500-foot stretch of undulations produces severe fore-and-aft pitching in cars, and extreme suspension deflection in heavy trucks. Staggered bumps raise alternate sides 6 inches. They twist a truck's chassis up to 15 degrees in each direction, for a combined twist of 30 degrees. There are steep hills on the route: up to 14 percent uphill and 12 per-

cent downhill. They test pulling power and braking power, and when combined with chatter bumps, they create large pitching motions in the test vehicle.

The Drive

On the smooth oval, the rig handles like any other Century Class. There is no way of telling this was a low profile. That speaks well for the engineering, because one objective of the design was to keep the Century Class' feeling and handling. Climbing the steepest hills is no problem for the 525-hp Cummins. I do have to wind it up all the way to 2100 rpm so I won't drop too low shifting the 9-speed Eaton Fuller. Still, I keep it accelerating up the 14 percent hill.

Once at the top, we begin the torture track. It is amazing to feel a truck twist one way, then the other, trying to pull itself apart. On the undulating road, the truck goes from full bounce to full rebound, while I swing from hitting the fully bottomed seat cushion

to flying off the seat and back again. If not for the seat belt, I would literally be hitting the roof.

To get from the torture track to the oval, we have to descend the 12 percent grade. With 92,000 pounds and only 15-inch brake drums, I feel a bit nervous, even though I know the Freightliner can take it. Gary wouldn't have let me drive it if he wasn't sure. A few smooth laps on the oval at 65 gradually bring me back to reality.

There is a surprising volume of traffic inside the Proving Grounds, even after dark when we do our final laps. With so many outsiders, it can get quite busy, so rigid safety rules are strictly enforced.

Did we find anything on the Low Profile that needed further development? I was sworn to secrecy, but I can report that when Freightliner does release it, all clearance and structural problems will be solved. I'm looking forward to the production version, even if those little wheels make it look strange. ✪

DOWN TIME

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Parking is easier yet at the National Atomic Museum. Run by the U.S. Department of Energy, the museum is located on Kirtland Air Force Base. Visitors must stop and get a pass at the gate.

"I didn't worry about locking my truck," Perry says. "If it ain't safe there, it ain't safe anywhere." It certainly looked safe, parked in the shade of an enormous B-52B "Stratofortress" and an F-105D fighter bomber designed to carry nuclear weapons. "It would've been better if we could have got up into the planes," says Hanson. But that's no longer allowed, not since a visitor split her head open.

Inside the building, Perry lingered over displays of missiles, bomb casings and model submarines. "This kind of stuff fascinates me," he says. "I've read lots of books by Tom Clancy and he tells how it all works, in a fictional format."

But if techno-thrillers aren't your style, then go for the fascinating 51-minute documentary that traces America's race to build "the bomb," from the federal takeover of a private school to its building of an entire town and research lab in secret. By 1945, more than 3000 people lived and worked in Los Alamos, N.M. And not one squealed.

From covered wagons to nuclear bombers and rattlesnakes to polar bears, Albuquerque is a city of contrasts. Where else do desert mesas surround snow-covered peaks? Or television antennas sprout from ancient adobe huts? The city strives to bridge both time and cultures. Does it succeed? Get out and decide for yourself.

Aline A. Newman periodically forsakes the wilds of western New York State for the Wild West. Her last contribution to Road King was a profile of Trucker Buddy Donna Campbell in August 1996. ✪

PUZZLER ANSWERS

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