



Abo Pass Trail

The Abo Pass Trail has been a byway for centuries. A humble footpath, leading past the ancient Pueblo of Abo, served as a trade route between Pueblo and Plains Indians nearly five hundred years ago. Today, starting in Belen, it links Camino Real Scenic Byway with the Salt Missions Trail Scenic Byway.

Members of Don Juan de Oñate's expedition visited the area in 1598, the year Oñate declared all of what was to become New Mexico as a part of New Spain. In 1740, Captain Diego de Torres and his brother-in-law Antonio Salazar founded the settlement of Belen as a part of the Nuestra Señora de Belen (Our Lady of Bethlehem) land grant. With the coming of the Americans in 1846, the colony grew into a mercantile center. The 1880 entrance of the railroad opened Belen to more settlement, and it swelled again with the 1889 Homestead Act.

Around the turn of the 20th century, the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway ended its search for a new route through New Mexico's mountains by building the Belen Cutoff, a bypass from Belen to Texico over Abo Pass. Thereafter, all transcontinental freight trains were routed through Belen to refuel and change crews. Belen's ties to the railroad continue to this day, most recently with the arrival of New Mexico's sleek Rail Runner Express. At the Rail Runner's most southern stop, the trains pull up within yards of the Harvey House Museum, a cache of railroad memorabilia, especially from the heyday of Fred Harvey and his chain of legendary rail-side restaurants. Belen today, as through the years, still derives much of its economy from agriculture.

To traverse the Trail, leave Belen to the east on NM 47, angling off to the southeast through the grassy plains of the Rio Grande Valley, toward its junction with US Highway 60. The road here begins to climb the foothills of the Manzano Mountains and the terrain changes to red rock formations scattered with piñon and juniper. Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge, only occasionally open to the public, stretches off to the west. Wildlife includes desert bighorn sheep, pronghorn, mule deer, mountain lions, bears, and many bird species: bald eagle, peregrine falcon, heron, sandhill crane, and burrowing owl.

The byway follows US 60 east for a dozen miles to the Abo Pueblo ruins. Once one of the Southwest's largest Pueblo villages, Abo was founded near a cluster of freshwater springs and was inhabited from the 1300s until the 1670s, when drought is thought to have forced the residents to move. Only unexcavated mounds of melted adobe mark the many room blocks today though jagged remnants of the Spanish-founded San Gregorio de Abo Mission rise up through trees.

With nearby Gran Quivira and Quarai, Abo is now part of the Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument. The Salinas name comes from the salt flats and brakish water in the Estancia Valley, which led Oñate to declare salt one of the riches of New Mexico. The other pueblo ruins include remnants of Spanish churches too, reminders of the early mission to convert souls as well as claim newly discovered territory for the Spanish Crown.