



Geronimo Trail National Scenic Byway

The fierce love of freedom embodied by Chiricahua Apache warrior Geronimo more than a century ago is symbolized in the scenic byway honoring his name. Kicking off in Truth or Consequences, a delightfully quirky desert town built over bubbling hot springs, the Geronimo Trail National Scenic Byway meanders off in two distinct western forks, from the creosote and cholla-swept sands of the Chiricahua Desert to the piñon and ponderosa cliffs of the Gila Wilderness. In between it passes the largest lake reservoir in New Mexico and hairpins its way to through rugged carved canyons, thickly wooded mountain passes, quaint villages, and ghost towns that still number a few live souls in their ledgers. Choose either the southern route on Highway 152 to San Lorenzo, or the northern route, via Highways 52 and 59 to Beaverhead. Better yet, check out both.

Aldo Leopold Wilderness

This wilderness, which straddles the Continental Divide and the crest of the Black Range, contains the most rugged and wild portion of the area's mountains, and pays tribute to one of the greatest pioneers of wilderness preservation, one-time U.S. Forestry employee Leopold. Only Forest Road 150 separates it from the even larger Gila Wilderness (below). The Black Range shoots out in a network of deep canyons and precipitous timbered ridges, rincons, and forested benches, truly a land of superlative beauty and unbroken serenity. South of Hwy. 59 between Winston and Beaverhead. www.oldwestcountry.com/tmp11.php?CID=472G6

Caballo Lake State Park

A smaller version of its elephantine cousin farther north (below), the lake is a favorite destination for bass, walleye, crappie, and northern pike fishing. Other recreation includes water skiing, jet skiing, swimming, and windsurfing. At the park's gateway, visitors pass a cactus garden with pathways winding among the towering yuccas, century plants, spiky ocotillos, and prickly pears. From October through the spring months, migrating bald and golden eagles make the area their winter home. 16 miles south of Truth or Consequences just east of I-25. www.newmexico.org/explore/state_parks/caballo.php

Elephant Butte Lake State Park

Encompassing the largest lake in New Mexico, the park sits outside Truth or Consequences, and is New Mexico's main water sports destination, with boating, fishing, water-skiing, canoeing, swimming, and more. The 40-mile long reservoir was created by damming a portion of the Rio Grande for irrigation and flood control. Along with 200 miles of shoreline, sandy beaches, and quiet coves, "The Butte" offers enough open water for cabin cruisers and houseboats, and full-service marinas to attend to them. The lake gets its name from a rock formation that resembles an elephant, at least to some observers. The butte formation, actually the eroded core of an ancient volcano, rises up in the lake's center, northeast of the dam. The area was once the hunting ground of the fearsome tyrannosaurus Rex, largest land-dwelling predator of all time. The park's visitor center contains interpretive exhibits of the geology, history, and ecology of the area. Just off I-25 at Elephant Butte. www.emnrd.state.nm.us/PRD/elephant.htm

Geronimo Trail Visitors' Center

One of the fiercest and shrewdest warriors who ever lived, Geronimo did not turn to fighting until after the senseless slaughter of his mother, wife, children, and other tribal women. He was born in the 1820s near the headwaters of the Gila River and loved this wilderness area, but the US Government eventually moved Geronimo and the Chiricahua Apaches out of their homeland. He became a celebrity in his later life, but the great military leader was never granted the wish to return to the area that now bears his name. The visitors' center tells the

story in depth and orients visitors to the Byway. 211 Main Street, Truth or Consequences. www.geronimotrail.com

Geronimo Springs Museum

This museum contains the history of Sierra County, New Mexico, from mammoth and mastodon skulls and the world-class collection of prehistoric Mimbres pottery. Includes Apache, Hispanic, military, mining, ranching, and cultural exhibits too. 211 Main Street, Truth or Consequences. www.geronimospringsmuseum.com

Ghost Towns of Winston and Chloride

Silver boom towns in the late 1800s, these two ghost towns show a shadow of what life was like in their heyday, when thousands of people called them home. Be sure to stop in Chloride's Pioneer Store Museum, built of Ponderosa pine logs as a general store at the beginning of the 1880's silver fever. The live oak tree that still stands in the middle of Wall Street, known as the Hangin' Tree, served that purpose to some extent. If cowboys or miners got too rowdy, they would be dunked in the stock tank, then chained to the tree until they saw the error of their ways. The village of Winston was started a few years after Chloride by the gentle folk who could not abide the coarser element in Chloride. Winston on Hwy 52, 40 miles west of Truth or Consequences; Chloride 2 miles south. www.pioneerstoremuseum.com/index.html

Gila National Forest/Gila National Wilderness

With three million three hundred thousand acres, the Gila contains more publicly owned land than any other national forest outside of Alaska. Within the Gila Forest is the largest wilderness in the southwest, the Gila Wilderness. This superb example of pristine mountains, forests, range land, and protected desert was the first-ever designated wilderness area in the world. Established in 1924, credit goes largely to the persistent lobbying efforts of Aldo Leopold, who devoted much of his life to preserving our nation's wild places for future generations. Birdwatchers come to the Gila in droves, to spot more than 330 avian species. The wealth of birds relates to the diverse ecological habitat found on the Gila and its location on a migratory flight path. An ancient culture, the Mogollon, once flourished in the Gila region. The people passed on, probably around 1300 A.D. Where they went, or why, no one knows. They were, however, impressive builders. In the heart of the Gila Forest, a one-mile loop up a shady canyon leads visitors to the **Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument**, a forty two-room collection of homes which the Mogollon people constructed in five spacious sandstone caves. The Mogollons were also talented pottery makers, and before vanishing into history, they apparently shared this art with the Mimbres people, who lived in the fertile river valleys below their cliff dwelling neighbors. By the time the first Spaniard set foot in southwest New Mexico, it was Apaches, mostly Chiricahua, who inhabited the area. The U.S. Army chased them for years up into the Gila's wild country, and according to legend, never even caught sight of them. Accessible from San Lorenzo on Hwy. 35, or by continuing past the Byway's San Lorenzo end on Hwy. 152. www.nps.gov/gicl/

Hillsboro

An 1880s-era territorial village, Hillsboro's history is that of the silver boom and bust. Later, gold sustained the area longer than some other mining towns. Hillsboro today is still an active community, known for its March Bookfest and, in mid-May, the Heritage Music Festival. 17 miles west of I-25 on Hwy. 152. www.hillsboronm.org Historic Percha Bank Once the largest bank in New Mexico Territory, now the only fully intact original building in Kingston. Stop in to see the ornate lobby and vault, once home to \$7 million in silver, a fortune many times over a century ago. Kingston, on Highway 152, 9 miles west of Hillsboro. www.newmexico.org/experience/museums/percha_bank.php

Percha Dam State Park

Percha Dam State Park may well be the greatest hidden treasure of the New Mexico State Park system. One of the 5 top birding areas in New Mexico, Percha, along with the other 2 parks on the Byway, was recently designated as Audubon "Important Birding Areas." At an elevation of 4,100 feet, the serene park is shaded by tall cottonwoods. The 80-acre haven provides camping, excellent river fishing, swimming, and waterside hiking trails. *Migration Sensation* is the park's 2-day spring education and event celebration. Near Caballo.
www.newmexico.org/explore/state_parks/percha_dam.php

Truth or Consequences

In an oft-told story, the unknown town of Hot Springs took up Ralph Edwards, host of a popular 1950s NBC television show, on a dare to rename an American burg for the show, in exchange for taping the show here and broadcasting the virtues of the community to the nation. T or C's mineral hot springs, desert setting, and mountain backdrops still appeal to spa seekers and other visitors looking for relaxed charm. The future New Mexico Spaceport is not far from T or C. www.truthorconsequences.net