



Guadalupe Back Country Byway

Click to view Area attractions and map in new window.

Starting north of Carlsbad, the Route 137-based Byway runs southwest for about 30 miles through Chihuahuan Desert lands and up into the rugged Guadalupe Mountains. As you traverse the back country route, visualize the vast underground resources here, dating to prehistoric times. Not far below the surface is a massive system of beautiful caves formed by the waters of an inland sea, which attracts spelunkers and scientists from around the globe. Miles below that lie the oil and gas riches of the Permian Basin. Those visitors prepared for off-road travel can follow the unpaved continuation of Highway 137 toward Texas and Guadalupe Peak.

Brantley Lake State Park

In this southern desert park, the damming of the Pecos River created a refreshing lake to provide a contrast to the rugged landscape. The southernmost lake in New Mexico, Brantley offers camping, boating, and fishing for largemouth bass, catfish, crappie. Look for lots of New Mexico's zippy state bird, the roadrunner. The park's visitor center tells the story of Seven Rivers, a Wild West village that petered out, but not before accumulating a fascinating history connected to the Lincoln County War. 12 miles north of Carlsbad via Hwy. 285 www.newmexico.org/explore/state_parks/brantley.php

Carlsbad Caverns National Park

While not accessed from the Byway's Route 137, the road runs over underground caves, the grandest of which are the world-renown Carlsbad Caverns, comprised of more than 100 limestone caves. These caves and others in the area were formed some 250,000 million years ago, even before dinosaurs walked the earth, when the area was part of a vast inland sea. A "Don't Miss" on anyone's visit to New Mexico. Accessed via Route 62/180, southwest of Carlsbad. www.newmexico.org/explore/state_parks/carlsbad.php#

Lincoln National Forest

The Byway traverses the southernmost area of this vast national forest, best known as the birthplace of Smokey the Bear. Chihuahuan Desert plant life mixes with piñon, juniper, and ponderosa pine woodlands to create what the Spanish called, "El Espejismo del Desierto". This "Mirage in the Desert" is the perfect place for seekers of solitude or people who wish to "get away from it all." Caving permits available from the Forest Service. North and south of Hwy. 137 near the Byway's end. www.stateparks.com/lincoln.html

Living Desert Zoo and Gardens State Park

On a ridge of the Ocotillo Hills, looking down to Carlsbad below, this is an indoor-outdoor living museum. The zoo features animals, including endangered Mexican gray wolves, native to the surrounding Chihuahuan Desert. The botanical garden showcases succulents from the area and from around the world. In early May, the park becomes the site of a fascinating annual ritual, and a rare look into Native culture. Mescalero Apaches, whose original homeland extended to this area, conduct a mescal (or agave) roast in a massive underground pit. The roast is a part of all Apache girls' coming-of-age ceremony, and the hefty mescal hearts are one of five traditional foods prepared as a part of the ritual. Respectful visitors are welcome. Off Hwy. 285, between Carlsbad and Hwy. 137. www.newmexico.org/explore/state_parks/living_desert.php

Sitting Bull Falls Recreation Area

An oasis in the desert off the Byway's main road, Sitting Bull Falls cascades down a 100-plus-foot rock wall in a dead-end canyon, a small reminder of the sea that once covered this region. Sitting Bull Cave and other caverns hide behind the falls. Caving permits and a ranger guide are required for exploration (details found at website). Visitors can also enjoy 16 miles of trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding. On State Road 276 just off Hwy 137 in the Lincoln National Forest. www.fs.usda.gov/