



Quebradas Back Country Byway

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Rainbow-hued ridges, deep jagged canyons and wind-whipped dunes await travelers wishing to venture off the Interstate into the rough-and-tumble geography of the Quebradas Backcountry Byway. This 24-mile unpaved road slices through the arroyos, or breaks, that give the area its Spanish name and offers both vast and intimate views of New Mexico's geologic past. Wedged between two national wildlife refuges – Sevilleta and Bosque del Apache – and the state-run Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex, the Quebradas area also offers fleeting glimpses of desert wildlife, especially at dawn and dusk.

From Interstate 25, exit at Escondida and head east, then north to the turnoff for Escondida Lake. Drive past the lake, cross the Rio Grande, turn south at the "T," turn west and follow the Backcountry Byway signs. The road is annually maintained and high-clearance or four-wheel-drive vehicles are recommended, although passenger cars may cross if it is dry.

This is the northern edge of upper Chihuahan desert country, with rolling bench lands of pungent creosote scrub, Mormon tea, sand sage and four wing saltbush punctuated by spiky yucca, cholla and prickly pear cacti. Spindly ocotillo, gray in winter and waving like upended roots, sprout bright green leaves and red-flowered tips after spring and summer rains.

Woven tapestries of yellow ochre, burnt sienna and buff-colored ridges of sandstone, shale and limestone run north-south, bisected by arroyos that drain west to the Rio Grande and provide primitive camping and hiking options as well as wildlife travel corridors. Arroyos to the east and south drain into a closed basin with the ominous name Jornada del Muerto – the Journey of Death. Snow-capped Socorro Peak peeks out to the west through gaps in the arroyo, while Sierra Larga, Mesa Redonda and the orange and buff-colored cliffs of Loma de Las Canas dominate horizon views along the road.

A walk into Arroyo de los Pinos at mile four reveals a rift zone of uplifted, folded and eroded layers of rock. The arroyos Tio Bartolo, Tinajas and Tajo provide sandy walkways into rocky wonderlands of vertical painted cliffs, tortured badlands and shoulder-wide box canyons. Layers of soft sedimentary rock eaten by wind and water reveal curving layers of harder rock, calling to mind dinosaur vertebrae trapped within cliffs. In some places, older rocks were faulted on top of younger rocks and layers were tilted on end or folded. Many of the red rocks are the same Permian Abo Formation seen on the back of the Sandia Mountains east of Albuquerque.

The region is indeed primeval – the Lomas de las Canas cliffs are layered, multicolored Pennsylvanian and Permian sandstone, limestone, siltstone and shale. A Precambrian rock outcrop was carved into spectacular box canyons by the arroyos Tajo and Presilla, the limestone and granite walls sculpted by flowing water. Arroyo del Tajo shelters ancient Native American pictographs on rock walls so fragile they may crumble to dust at any moment.

Ancient seeps and springs provide oases for mule deer, jackrabbits, coyotes, bobcat, dove, quail and gray and red fox, while some arroyos provide wildlife travel corridors from nearby Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge. Red-tailed, Cooper's and Swainson's hawks, American kestrels, turkey vultures, ravens and numerous songbirds may be sighted as well. Wintering sandhill cranes and snow geese traverse the skies between Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge to the south and the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex to the north. The two agencies cooperate by growing grain to attract hungry migrating birds away from local private farmlands. Travelers may see geese and cranes commuting the Rio Grande waterway between the areas during the winter months. Wildlife managers mow grain low to attract geese and "bar" it to a taller height to bring in the cranes.

This is a region of solitude, stillness and expansive terrain, where time is suspended and the song of a horned lark and the track of a roadrunner are the sole evidence of other beings. It is sometimes called "Little Utah" for its rocky resemblance to the painted desert regions of that neighboring state, but "Quebradas" is equally suitable for the rugged breaks that riffle across its badlands. The abundant arroyos tunnel into rock-strewn and twisted wonderlands for exploration on foot, while the road itself bisects an ancient land far removed from Interstate bustle.

The Bureau of Land Management oversees the area for wilderness study areas, recreation, mineral exploration and livestock grazing. Photography, rock hounding, hiking, wildlife watching, hunting, cultural sightseeing and backcountry vehicle touring are among the many recreation opportunities. The Socorro Fat Tire Festival includes the Quebradas Backcountry Byway on the itinerary of its annual mountain bike race. Camping is primitive in nature and no water or services are available along the road.

The Quebradas Backcountry Byway separates the Presilla and Sierra de las Canas wilderness study areas, which are managed to preserve their natural character and primitive recreational opportunities. Travelers should plan about two or three hours to drive the road and bring water, food, shovel and blankets. The road ends at Sandoval CR A129 and U.S. 380, about 11 miles east of San Antonio. Full services are available in Socorro. For more information, contact the Bureau of Land Management Socorro Field Office at (505) 835-0412.